

十文字 青

イラスト 白井 鋭利

Presented by Ao Jyunonji
Illustration by Eiri Shirai

灰^{はい}と^と幻想^{げんそう}の^のグリムガル

level:2

——大切じゃないものなんか、ない。

OVERLAP



著=十文字 青 イラスト=白井鋭利

灰と幻想のグリムガル

はい

げんそう

level.2—大切なものなんか、ない。

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BREAKTIME





"True. But if we were to go to someplace different, then where?"

It was almost as if she had the answer prepared.

"The Siren Mines," Mary said simply, without hesitation. Her expression was completely blank.

"But that's where—" Haruhiro began.

But he fell silent.



"Ranta! Hurry up!"

"Right!"

Haruhiro heard the reply, but Ranta never came.

Instead of Ranta, kobolds began scrambling up the rope ladder.

Mogzo kicked them back down, but others clambered up in their place.

Grimgal of Ashes and Illusion — The Story so Far

"Awaken."

Such he was told, and when he opened his eyes, before him was the unknown world of Grimgal.

In order to survive, Haruhiro teams up with others who had found themselves in the same circumstances: Manato, Ranta, Yume, Shihoru, and Mozgo. Together they form a team and begin their adventurous and dangerous days as reserve force soldiers.

However, they find themselves struggling with supposedly weak monsters such as goblins, and are soon surpassed by Renji's party, who arrived the same time as them.

Just as they began to come together as a team, they lose Manato.

Without the time to even properly grieve, they add Mary to their party out of need. It's not just goblins they combat, but also their own weakness, their lack of teamwork, and Mary's past. They confront the harsh reality of their present situation and build their strength, little by little, until they successfully take their revenge on the goblins that killed Manato.

Their adventure, however, doesn't end there.



Characters

Team Renji

Ron — class: Paladin — The team's No. 2.
 Sassa — class: Thief — Gaudy girl. Probably masochistic.
 Adachi — class: Mage — Four-eyes.
 Chibi — class: Priest — Mascot.

The Daybreakers

Pingo — class: Necromancer
 Shima — class: Sword Dancer
 Kemuri — class: Paladin
 Lilia — class: Shaman

Other

Kikkawa — class: Warrior
 Hayashi — class: Warrior
 Michiki — class: Warrior
 Mutsumi — class: Mage
 Ogg — class: Thief

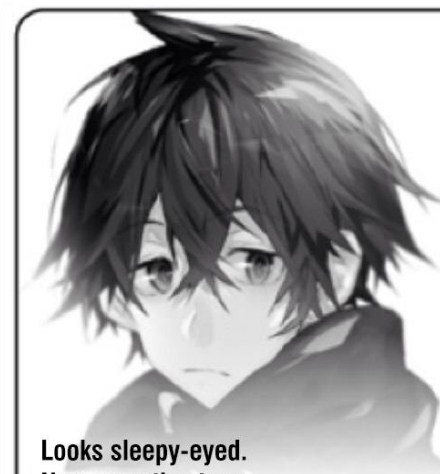
Other Characters



Inherently comforting type.
 Talks kind of funny?

Yume

class — Hunter



Looks sleepy-eyed.
 Non-assertive type,
 temporary team leader.

Haruhiko

class — Thief



Leader of Team Renji.
 A savage beast. Badass.

Renji

class — Warrior



Timidly thoughtful.
 Hard worker in the shadows.

Shihoru

class — Mage



An impulsive, selfish, vulgar person.
 Unpopular Person No. #1

Ranta

class — Dread Knight



Founder of the Daybreakers clan.
 Appears to have some sort of motive.

Souma

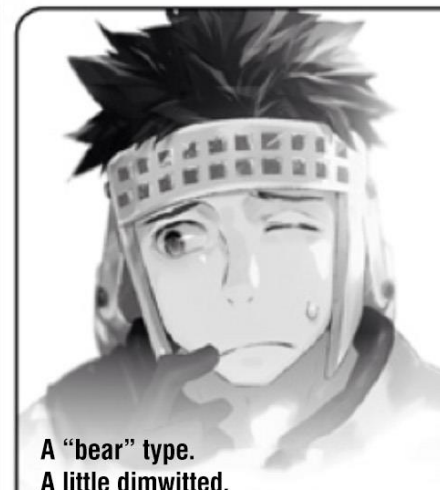
class — Knight



Icy beauty.
 A little older and more experienced.

Mary

class — Priest



A "bear" type.
 A little dimwitted,
 but dependable bear.

Mogzo

class — Warrior



Party unifier.
 Was a decent sort. (Past tense.)

Manato

class — Priest

Chapter 1: A Different Level

It happened as Haruhiro and the others loitered, having finished selling their day's loot and divided their earnings, perfunctorily discussing what they should do next.

A loud, frantic clanging echoed through Altana's marketplace.

"Is that..." Haruhiro's eyebrows narrowed. "The six o'clock bell? But it sounded seven times, and all crazy, too..."

"What?! What?! What's going on?!" Ranta's messy hair flopped back and forth as he snapped his head around.

"Mm?" Yume blinked rapidly, tugging on her twin-tail braided hair. "What's happening?"

Shihoru edged closer to Yume. "Sounds like... an emergency?"

Mogzo rubbed the back of his helm, fidgeting, expression anxious.

"It can't be..." Mary leaned forward slightly, her eyes narrowing to slits. "An enemy attack?"

"Huh?" Haruhiro tilted his head. He had understood the definitions of the words, but had no idea what she meant. "Enemy attack?"

A shout pierced through the air from somewhere. It sounded distant.

Ranta's nostrils flared. "Oy! Oy! Oy!" he shouted. "Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!"

Why was he acting so intensely? Because he was an idiot?

"Mary, what do you mean by 'enemy'?" Haruhiro asked.

The reply was terse. "Probably orcs."

Orcs? he wondered, unfamiliar with the word.

"Run!" someone cried.

"Orcs!" another shouted.

"It's *orcs*!"

"Orcs are here!"

"We've been invaded!"

"Oh?" Yume placed an index finger on her chin. "I didn't know okras could invade."

Straight-man Haruhiro shot back, "No, not okras, ORCS!"

All the people scattered about the marketplace suddenly converged into a solid stream of bodies, and it swallowed up Haruhiro and the others in an instant. The tide of panicked shoppers swept him away, and he found it impossible to move against the tremendous force shoving at his back.

“What the—!” Ranta was attempting to fight against the crowd, but he too found resistance impossible. “What the hell!”

“Whoa!” Mogzo’s eyes seemed to spin crazily in their sockets. As large as he was, Mogzo had a rough time with the assaulting flurry of elbows and knees.

“M-my hat!” Shihoru cried, as her mage’s hat flew off her head.

Haruhiro snapped his hand out and caught hold of it rather neatly. Then everything went downhill after that. Shoved along by the people behind him, he was quickly separated from everyone else.

“Haru!” Yume called.

“HARU!!” Mary’s voice.

The top of Mogzo’s head was the only thing he could see now, and that only barely. But making his way back over there was impossible.

“G-guys!” Haruhiro waved his hand frantically, but it was no good. He had lost sight of even Mogzo. “Watch yourselves, everyone!”

But though he told them that, Haruhiro realized that he had to be the most careful of everyone. If he tried to carelessly force his way against the stampeding crowd, he would be trampled. He could even die. To die like that... no, just no. So for now, he had no choice but to submit to being rushed along.

An attack... or so Mary had said. *Enemy attack? Orcs. What were orcs?* Haruhiro felt like he had heard the word somewhere before.

Whatever orcs were, this was definitely not a normal occurrence in Altana. Invasion. So they were being attacked? Altana was being attacked by orcs or whatever? And everyone was just running away? But to where?

This was a town; everyone had their homes here. And Altana was encircled by a high, thick defensive wall, which meant that nowhere around was as safe. Probably. Most likely. Or so Haruhiro thought. The supposedly safest place around, under attack. Did that mean... could it possibly be...

...that this was *really* bad?

The merchant tables that lined the streets were overturned, their goods scattered about and lost beneath the tide of feet. *What a waste*, Haruhiro thought. Some of the vendor stalls had had their frames broken apart, and others were completely flattened. *Their owners must be so pissed off...*

Wait, now wasn’t the time to be thinking about things like that!

A wailing cry rose from the direction everyone was heading. “They’re here! The enemy’s here! Run! RUN! The other way! Run!”

Suddenly, the tide of people began to surge in the opposite direction. But an abrupt reverse was impossible; the people at the front made an about-face, while those behind them kept going straight ahead. And Haruhiro was unfortunate enough to be caught right at the center of the switch. He found himself smashed in, unable to move at all.

“Can’t—can’t breathe! Quit pushing!” he gasped.

He was going to be crushed to death. *To die like this... you’ve gotta be kidding!* Somehow, Haruhiro shoved and dodged his way through the mass of people, until he reached a still erect merchant stall. He ducked through the black curtain that served as the entrance.

“Ugh, gross...” His nose rebelled at the stench.

And it wasn’t just the smell that was weird; the objects that lined the counter and shelves were odd as well, filled with mounted animals, animal remains, bones, fangs, feathers, and even accessories made from the aforementioned.

“Over here...”

The suddenness of the voice made Haruhiro jump, yelping. When he looked, a crinkled old woman dressed in black was beckoning to him from behind a counter. It was evident to Haruhiro that she was totally shady.

“Come here!” the old woman commanded reprovingly when Haruhiro failed to answer straight away.

Timidly, Haruhiro sauntered over. “Err, this your store, ma’am?”

“How rude! I ain’t no old *ma’am*! Call me young miss!”

“Um... miss...” Haruhiro started to correct himself as the old woman smiled.

“Go on...”

“But you’re not a... I mean, you don’t look...”

“Hey, if you’re going to play the straight-man, then don’t half-ass it!”

That’s because the funny-man—woman—is damn shady in the first place, Haruhiro thought, but didn’t say.

The old woman shrugged her shoulders. “I’m Madam Baaba.”

“Ma’am is short for madam!” Haruhiro shot back.

The old woman harrumphed. “That’s more like it, straight-man.”

“...Thanks. I guess.”

“Don’t you start getting sarcastic with me, boy!” She stopped. “Never mind. Let’s start over. My name is Madam Baaba, a spellcrafter and, as you can see, owner of this magical goods shop. Are you a member of the reserve force?”

“Yeah, what about it?” Haruhiro replied, trying his best to steal glances outside and not breathe through his nose.

The door curtain prevented any view of what was going on. However, Haruhiro could still hear a significant clamor coming from out there. The attack was still ongoing, or so it seemed.

“An invasion? Really?” he whispered to himself.

“Orcs? Oh well. It happens once in a while,” Madam Baaba remarked off-handedly. “You wouldn’t happen to be a rookie, would you?”

“I guess,” Haruhiro said. “I haven’t been working for Crimson Moon that long.”

“I thought as much. Are you a virgin?”

“A what?!”

“Silly boy. I’m not talking about whether or not you’ve done it with a girl before! Reserve force soldiers are considered virgins ’til they’ve killed an orc. Don’t tell me... you’re a double-virgin?!”

“Single, double, triple, WHO CARES?!”

“Not an ounce of ambition!” Madam Baaba pointed an accusing finger at him. “You’re a man, aren’t you? A young man, right? You want to kill orcs and sleep with girls, don’t you? What are you going to do without the drive?!”

“So what? What’s the big deal?!”

“Idiot boy!” Madam Baaba yelled, spittle flying.

She looked as if she was going to rip into him more, but the door curtain suddenly flew open. Haruhiro blinked in surprise as someone entered. It wasn’t *someone* though, it was *something*. No human being, after all, had green skin.

It was huge, too. Not in height so much as girth. It was barrel-chested, with a nose that looked like it had been smashed in; pointed ears, boar-like tusks sticking out from the corners of its broad mouth, and blood red hair. It was armored and wielded a single-edged sword.

Just as Haruhiro was wondering what the hell it was, Madam Baaba shouted, “ORRRRRC!” She was holding something like a walking stick in her hands. “It’s in my shop! Soldier Boy, now’s your chance to lose your virginity! Get to it!”

“M-me?!” Haruhiro stammered as he tried to unsheathe his dagger; he couldn’t quite get a grip on it. “N-no way! I’m alone, and my class is Thief!”

“So what?! I’m an old granny! Grow a backbone, Thief!” Madam Baaba scolded as she gave Haruhiro a rough shove in the back.

“W-whoa!” He almost fell flat on his face. She was pretty strong for an old granny.

The orc had been drawing closer all the while and Haruhiro found himself in deep trouble. It lunged and swung and stabbed at him with its sword, shouting in a language that he couldn’t understand.

“What the—! No way!” He deflected and dodged the attacks but soon found his back pressed against the counter.

“What’re you doing?!” Madam Baaba screeched at him.

“You’re asking me?!” Haruhiro flipped himself over the top of the counter and tried to make a run for it.

“OSHUU BAGDA!!!” the orc cried, leaping up and over in pursuit.

There was no way. Haruhiro was going to die. He was going to be killed. He shouted wildly, grabbing any and all objects in reach to throw at the orc. But even if it got hit, the orc acted as if he didn’t even feel it.

No way! No way, no way, NO WAY! Words failed to express how bad things were. Haruhiro dove through the door curtain and was outside the shop once more.

“It’s... not following?” he whispered to himself. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Madam Baaba’s came from within. “Soldier Boy! How could you just leave an old granny to die?! Oh, the inhumanity!”

“And what exactly do you expect me to do...?” Haruhiro muttered.

He could see the outlines of other orcs in the distance. After all, he reasoned, this was an invasion, so of course there would be more than one. Tons more. This was bad. Really bad. Horribly bad. He had to run. Hide somewhere, maybe, until people who could deal with the orcs came. It wasn’t like Madam Baaba was a friend or anything. She was a total stranger. He had no obligation to help her. And it wasn’t like he could help even if he wanted to.

“I don’t have a choice...”

He took a single, deep breath—and yanked the shop’s door curtain open again. *Damn it! What am I doing?!* Hadn’t he been about to run? He still wanted to. His desire to run away was almost overwhelming. But if he left her, even if it had been a total stranger, he knew that he would never sleep well again.

So he didn’t have a choice. It wasn’t just because it would haunt him forever if he didn’t—it was because this was the only thing a decent human being could possibly do.

The orc swung its sword down at Madam Baaba. She blocked it with her walking stick, grunting as the force brought her almost to her knees, her face turning bright red with the effort of staying afoot. It was a good thing the walking stick was sturdy, but though she had stopped the orc’s attack, it was a close call. This was no time to be impressed, though; things were about as desperate as it got.

Haruhiro drew his dagger and set his sights on the orc’s back. “[BACKSTAB]!”

The blade, however, slipped off and was turned aside by the orc’s armor. It turned towards Haruhiro and bellowed, “GASHUU HA!”

“Soldier Boy!” Madam Baaba’s eyes were visibly sparkly. “I think I’m falling in love!”

“Seriously, don’t!” Haruhiro snapped, turning his back to the orc. “Come over here! Or... never mind!”

Unfortunately, the attention of the orc had now shifted from Madam Baaba to Haruhiro. *Should have stopped myself...* Haruhiro thought. *Should have run while I had the chance...* But it was too late for regrets now.

“HASHUU HASHUU HASHUU!” The orc chanted as he chased Haruhiro out of the shop.

Haruhiro ran until his breathing became heavy and ragged. His armor was light and he was running for all he was worth, and yet the orc, despite wearing heavy armor, kept up easily. He couldn’t put any distance between them at all.

“Scary...” he muttered, turning into a small street. Trying to give the orc the slip, he wedged himself between the narrow rows of stalls, forcing his way through.

But the orc was right behind him, armor clanking, following Haruhiro every step of the way. Haruhiro wanted to give up. He wanted to say to the orc, *Excuse me, but can we cross the finish line now? Would that be okay with you?*

He decided to call the next turn that finish line. Haruhiro would stick it out until then, and after that... it was probably not possible to keep going. He was at his limits, both mentally and physically. Sorry, but it was time to retire.

Haruhiro turned the corner, half-stumbling around the bend, when a low, husky voice commanded, “Get down!”

He obeyed reflexively and felt something sweep across the top of his head. That something was a sword. Around the corner, someone had been waiting. The owner of the husky voice. He had swung his sword in a horizontal slicing motion, missing Haruhiro’s head by mere inches, and connected with the orc.

The orc made a surprised gurgling noise and Haruhiro turned just in time to see the orc’s head fly off its shoulders. The silver-haired man who had killed it had his back turned to Haruhiro.

Renji.

Renji had joined Crimson Moon the same day as Haruhiro, but it sure didn’t look that way. Over his stylish armor was a fur-lined cloak and in his hand was an impressive looking blade. Haruhiro knew Renji was a different sort the moment he laid eyes on him, but even so, it was hard to believe the difference was this big.

One hit, after all. Renji had killed that orc in one blow. The difference was too great.

“You okay?” Renji asked, to which Haruhiro could only nod mechanically.

Not cool. Not cool at all. Why am I so pathetic? Intensely embarrassed, Haruhiro hurriedly got back up to his feet thinking that he at least had to say thanks, but not able to find his voice.

“Renji, you’ve pissed them off again!” The new voice had belonged to a splendidly armored man with short cropped hair. He was pointing to the other side of the street.

It was Ron. When Haruhiro looked to where he was pointing, he saw three orcs coming directly at them.

“Jeeru mea gram fel kanon!” chanted Adachi, the Mage with the black-rimmed glasses, as he etched an elemental glyph with the tip of his staff.

Haruhiro had no idea what type of magic that was. A bluish elemental flew towards one of the orcs and twined itself around its legs. The orc didn’t trip or fall over, but it could no longer walk properly. The other two orcs didn’t even blink at their disabled companion. They kept coming.

Suddenly, a long leg shot out from the alleyway to connect to an orc’s knee. The orc could not possibly have dodged, the kick was timed so impeccably. Haruhiro couldn’t be sure, but it looked like the Thief’s fighting technique, [KNEESHATTER]. The orc fell forward with a heavy grunt. The person who took it down was scantily dressed in bright, flashy colors.

Sassa, huh...

“Nice!” said Ron, as he advanced forward to engage the last.

Ron wasn’t short by any measure; however, he still looked it compared to the orc. But despite his smaller build, Ron’s string of attacks steadily pushed it back. Meanwhile, the orc that Sassa had disabled was starting to get back to its feet to rejoin its companions, though it looked to be in a lot of pain. Sassa did not intend to let it. She stood before it to block its way, and at less than five feet tall, she became dwarfed by its hulking form.

A girl dressed in Priest’s clothes and carrying a short staff was there in the thick of things, too, but she came across to Haruhiro like a small child doing her best to play adult. What was Chibi trying to do?

Chibi muttered something and stuck her staff straight out at the orc. The orc roared at her and made to sweep her staff aside with its sword.

“Wha—!” Haruhiro’s voice caught in his throat.

The orc’s swing missed as Chibi brought not just the tip of the staff, but the entire shaft around in an arc.

“Yah!” she squeaked. Utilizing the momentum of the swing, she brought it back around to smack into the orc’s lower back.

It didn’t bring the orc down, but it did get its attention. The orc stopped in its tracks, and Chibi hopped back to where Renji waited.

He patted her head with a large hand and said, “Well done, Chibi.”

Chibi made a cooing noise, her face turning beet red.

The next moment, Renji buried the edge of his heavy sword in the orc’s shoulder. It hardly mattered that the orc wore sturdy-looking armor—this was Renji, after all. He yanked his sword out, and at the same time kicked the orc square in the chest with enough force to send it flying. This flailing orc, trying to keep from falling over, was nothing to Renji. He killed it easily by thrusting his sword into the base of its throat, twisting it as it cut through.

A howl erupted from the orc that Ron was fighting; it had been forced back onto its knees by Ron’s relentless attacks, and he would have no trouble finishing it now. Punctuating them with shouts, Ron rained blows to the top of its head in blazingly fast succession, and he didn’t stop until its skull was wide open.

Strong... and loud, too, noted Haruhiro.

In the time Haruhiro had spent watching Ron in awe, Renji had meanwhile been moving. Right now, he was closing in on the orc that Adachi had magically disabled earlier, and the way that Renji maneuvered—it reminded Haruhiro of Master Barbara from his Thieves Guild. His motions were almost her motions, stealthy and silent.

Haruhiro found himself captivated despite himself.

Not to mention the way Renji handled his sword. It looked pretty heavy, and yet Renji swung and spun it as if it were simply an extension of his own arm. He had sliced through the first orc’s neck, bone and all, like it was nothing more than tissue paper. Haruhiro thought that to be the most fascinating. How could Renji slice through something as hard as bone as if it were nothing?

“That’s the last of them,” Ron said, tapping himself on the shoulder with his sword.

Haruhiro didn’t move, he was so astounded—and maybe his awe was why he noticed, when no one else did. Maybe it was because his eyes needed to be in more than one place, so that even though he wasn’t trying to pay attention to absolutely everything, his view of the scene was still broader than theirs.

Something had moved. From the top of a building. The roof.

“Renji, above you!” Haruhiro shouted.

Renji jumped backwards immediately. A split second slower and he would have been cut down, there and then.

Something had descended upon Renji from the top of the building. It was an orc by all appearances; however, its hair was white, with some silvery sheen to it. Oddly enough, Renji’s hair was silver too.

It’s some kind of law of the universe, Haruhiro thought. *Silver hair equals damn cray.*

Just like Renji, that orc was damn cray, damn straight. It wasn't just its size. It was outfitted in ebony black armor, and the cloak draped over his shoulders was striped like a tiger's pelt—or perhaps it really was a tiger's pelt. It was so flashy that you couldn't call it anything but frickin' insanely damn cray.

Every inch of its face was covered in tattoos. Frickin' raw and damn cray. Its gaze. Damn cray. Yellow colored eyes. Ferocious and damn cray. Its expression was supremely composed and calm, so it was probably fairly smart. Damn cray.

Finally, the sword it held in its hands. This purple tinted, single-edged sword, thick and long, its edge razor sharp, its tip serrated—cray-cray to the max, goddamn.

On top of all that, as the cray orc turned to face Renji, about ten more orcs appeared on the rooftops of the buildings around them. This was so beyond damn cray that it was probably one of those fucked-up-beyond-all-repair situations.

The orcs moved to descend from the rooftops, but they stopped when the tiger pelt clad, boss-like orc raised its left hand. It opened its mouth and began to speak.

“I am...”

What? Haruhiro was confused. *Did it just say, “I am”?*

“...Ishh Dogrann. You, what?”

It talked. Sure, its speech was a little broken, but it spoke in the human language. The corners of Renji's mouth curved slightly upwards. He was smiling. He did always seem to be smiling, but wasn't it just a little weird to be smiling at a time like this?

“The name's Renji. You gonna fight me, Ishh Dogrann?”

“ONN GASHUU RADD0!” The other orcs lowered their weapons as one at their boss, Ishh Dogrann's, command.

Does that mean it wants to fight in single combat?

“No one interfere,” Renji ordered the others in his party, his voice low.

Was he really going to do it? Fight one-on-one? Was Renji actually serious? It seemed like it.

They clashed. Haruhiro didn't see who made the first move. Each blade met the other in a series of loud clangs; sparks flew, and their crossguards locked as both leaned in to try to overpower each other. But they weren't just pressing in there—they were also subtly shifting their body weight so they could use their knees, too.

If Haruhiro had been kneed with the knees those two were dishing out, he would have been knocked head over heels with the first blow. They each wanted to break the other's balance, but they both remained on their feet. They separated in a flash.

Ishh Dogrann targeted Renji's leg, but Renji jumped to avoid getting swept out and answered with a swing at Ishh Dogrann's head. The orc boss blocked it with a gauntleted forearm, ducked sharply, and—and its tiger cloak. It had lobbed its cloak at Renji.

Haruhiro was taken completely by surprise at the move, but Renji wasn't. He didn't panic, didn't make any noise, he merely snatched the cloak out of the air and thrust his sword at the orc. Ishh Dogrann had probably intended to surprise Renji with it and make an exploitable opening.

When the ploy failed, the orc withdrew a little and crouched in a low ready stance.

“Good. Human. You’re good. Warrior.”

“Sure,” Renji replied curtly, closing the distance between them.

Their blades met again. This time, though, it was Renji who was on the offensive. Haruhiro’s hands had curled themselves into tight fists.

Renji can do this. He can win. Kill it! Take it down!

Or so Haruhiro believed. Or so it had seemed. Renji was dominating, keeping an obvious upper hand. Evidently, apparently—yet in the blink of an eye, Ishh Dogrann’s sword slashed deep into Renji’s left arm.

What? Haruhiro had no idea how it happened.

Renji separated from the orc, flexing his arm. The blood flowing from the horrible gash near his elbow was incredible in its profusion. The others on Team Renji gasped and shouted their concern while cheers went up from the orcs surrounding them.

Renji lowered his left arm, keeping his grip on his sword with his right. It seemed he intended to continue one handed—not that the wound on his left gave him any other choice. That arm was probably useless now. But Renji’s sword was large and heavy. He was at a clear disadvantage.

He took a deep breath... and smiled. Despite all that, he was still smiling.

“Not bad,” he told the orc boss.

The smile was different from the one he wore before. It wasn’t just the corners of his mouth this time; his smile now stretched across his entire face. It made Haruhiro shudder.

Scary... that Renji’s downright terrifying, he thought, and not for the first time. Renji had been so since the beginning.

Renji went on the offensive again. Ishh Dogrann, still wielding his blade with both arms, parried Renji’s one-armed attacks with ease. Renji’s blows were lighter than before, and if they were to clash directly now, he might fail to match the orc boss’ strength.

Indeed, it seemed as if the orc was close to stripping Renji’s sword out of his hand entirely—Renji was only barely able to keep his grip on it. It left his upper body, from chest to head, completely open to attack.

Chibi let out a high-pitched yelp as Ishh Dogrann slammed the back of his armored fist into Renji’s face. The gauntlet he wore was mostly metal and the plates extended all the way to his knuckles. The blow broke Renji’s nose; smashed it in so hard, he was covered in blood in mere seconds.

Renji, still smiling, attacked again.

His attacks were blocked or deflected at every turn even as the orc boss rained counterattacks down on him. Before long, Renji was covered in wounds. He had armor on, but it wasn’t the type that completely enclosed its wearer from head to toe. Ishh Dogrann aimed his attacks at the open areas with surgical precision. Even worse, the orc boss’ dreadful sword was able to rip off smaller pieces of armor entirely.

“OSHUU! OSHUU! OSHUU!” The orc underlings chanted excitedly, their feet stamping a tattoo into the ground.

Renji kept on attacking, but Haruhiro could barely stand to watch. Pure willpower was the only thing that could be keeping Renji going now. Either that, or perhaps Renji knew that if he switched to defense, he would be overpowered in an instant. He had no choice but to stay on the offensive.

“Ron!” Haruhiro couldn’t bear remaining silent any longer. “You aren’t going to help him?! You’re just going to stand there?! Adachi! Chibi! Sassa! Renji’s gonna die!”

“If we do that...” said Sassa, face pale and sweaty—she forced herself to smile sardonically. “Renji will kill us afterwards.”

Chibi said something as well, her expression as fierce as if she wanted to write her feelings on her face. Haruhiro didn’t really think this was her hinting at something, but he couldn’t be sure.

Renji attacked yet again, and yet again Ishh Dogrann deflected it with ease. The scene had not changed. The orc looking as if it was going to strip Renji’s sword out of his hand, Renji barely managing to keep a hold on it, leaving his upper body completely exposed to attack. This was bad. Nothing was changing. Renji was going to lose.

Ishh Dogrann made to punch Renji in the face once more—only this time, Renji did not let him.

Renji gripped his sword with both hands and raised it high. The orc boss quickly veered backwards to dodge the incoming blow.

But that was impossible. This couldn’t happen. Renji’s left arm was supposed to have been rendered completely useless... but right before Haruhiro’s eyes, there he stood, handling his sword with a firm two-handed grip.

Renji let out a savage, bloodcurdling cry. Haruhiro didn’t think that Ishh Dogrann would back off just for that—but for a split second, the orc did freeze in his tracks. Renji brought down his sword in a diagonal slash, his blade cutting deep into the orc boss’ shoulder.

He then completely let go of his blade and knocked Ishh Dogrann down with a single punch. Relentlessly, Renji continued to pummel the orc boss, but his rage was not wild and aimless. It was a methodical fury. With discipline and meticulous precision.



Ishh Dogrann was no longer moving. Silence fell upon the entire area, with the only noise echoing through the streets being that of a dull thudding, of Renji's systematic strikes. All was absolutely still except for Renji. He clasped both hands together, raised them high over his head, then smashed what little remained of the orc boss' face in.

Renji heaved a deep sigh and flexed his neck left and right. "Not bad. Not bad at all, Ishh Dogrann. I'll be sure to remember your name."

Ron snorted. "You're a mess, Renji."

Light glinted off Adachi's glasses as he glared at the orcs on the rooftop above. Sassa still looked unsteady on her feet. Chibi scurried hurriedly over to Renji, but he merely waved her off, and picked up Ishh Dogrann's sword instead. He pointed it at the orcs loitering above.

"What? You want to give me a try? Then come down here! I'll take all of you on."

Isn't he being a bit over the top? Haruhiro thought. But of course Haruhiro couldn't help but think that. If he wasn't still half-numb, he might have realized that it was a good idea to talk big in a situation like this.

One of the orcs made a waving motion with his hand. Several of the others made grunting noises that sounded like a protest, but fell silent when the gaze of the first orc fell upon them. They then withdrew as a unit.

"I've..." Haruhiro barely managed to get a grip on himself and keep from sinking down to the ground. "I've been rescued."

It had all happened right before his eyes, yet he still couldn't believe it. He gazed at Renji, looked away, then looked at him again. Renji was ridiculously strong and beyond incredible. Comparing his group to Renji, words like "inadequate" or "envious" just didn't seem to cut it anymore.

Renji was strong. Just too strong.

Haruhiro sighed and looked down at his hands. They were empty. He glanced around the immediate area, but it wasn't there. Shihoru's hat. When had he lost hold of it? It wasn't a huge deal, but he still couldn't remember. It was gone.

"...What have I been doing?" he whispered to himself.

Chapter 2: Inept Executive

“...And that’s kinda how it happened!”

Haruhiro still couldn’t get over what had transpired even when he related the story to his companions later. Ranto, Mogzo, Shihoru, and Mary were all sitting at a corner at the back of Sherry’s Tavern, but it wasn’t just them. People drinking nearby were listening too. The attention made Haruhiro a little embarrassed.

He cleared his throat and went on. “Anyways, Team Renji’s amazing. And Renji the person is beyond amazing. That orc Ishh Dogrann seemed really strong too, and halfway through the fight, I thought Renji was done for. But he wasn’t. Not for real, anyway. It was like he was faking it, kinda like tricking the orc. Even I was completely sure that he couldn’t use his left arm—so was Ishh Dogrann.”

“Whoa!” Ranta mussed and pulled at his already messy hair. “So you’re saying that his disadvantage was really his trump card? And he kept it up his sleeve until he was at a bigger disadvantage?! Screw that! Goddamn showoff! Fuck him! I can do that too! I can do that one hundred percent!”

Yume glared coldly at him. “So you’re okay with dyin’ if you mess up?”

“I won’t mess up! There’s no way I could mess up! It’s a known fact!”

Shihoru, who ended up having to get a new hat, also looked disdainful. “What makes you so sure?”

“What? Um... Because...” Ranta fell silent in thought. In the end though, it didn’t seem like he could come up with anything. Instead he said, “Stupid! I don’t need any shitty reason! I just know it! SELF-CONFIDENCE! It’s all about self-confidence!”

Mary sighed softly as she brought her ceramic mug to her lips. “I think that’s true.”

“See?! Mary agrees with me! You guys are all amateurs and she’s the veteran so she’s right and you’re wrong! Amateurs!”

“But overconfidence may also become one’s undoing,” she added quietly, gazing meaningfully at Ranta.

“Er—” Ranta seemed to be at a loss for another comeback.

Mary had spoken the truth. She knew better than any other. Three of her original party had died this way. Because things went so well for them at first, they ended up overestimating their own ability, falling into disaster.

“B-but still,” uttered Mogzo. As usual, his prized helm lay on the table next to him. “Team Renji’s really something. We all arrived here at the same time, but they’re miles above us...”

Once Haruhiro had finished “The Legend of Renji”, the other clients who surrounded their table to listen in laughed good-naturedly and slapped Haruhiro on the shoulder.

“Work hard and catch up, Goblin Slayers!” they told him, and went about their own business once more.

Ranta stuck his tongue out at them and hissed, “Piss off. Don’t take us for losers!”

“Don’t get so worked up,” Yume said, resting her chin in both hands. “Yume thinks we’re fine goin’ at our paces.”

“You mean our own pace, Yume,” Haruhiro corrected mildly, nodding in agreement. “And I agree. I mean, now that I’ve seen Renji in action first-hand, it’s like he’s cut from a different cloth. We couldn’t imitate him even if we tried, and to be honest, I don’t even think we’ll get anything out of paying attention to him...”

“To force ourselves...” Shihoru started, but quickly fell silent.

Her gaze dropped to the floor, as if she was trying very hard to keep herself from saying whatever it was she wanted to say. Perhaps she was recalling their own precious, lost friend.

“And if we end up in a situation where we’ve got no way out, we might lose everything,” Haruhiro pointed out.

“You guys have no ambition!” Ranta pointed from Yume to Haruhiro to Shihoru. “Do you know how pathetic you guys sound?! No pain, no gain! No guts, no glory! No risk, no return! If you want a high return, then you gotta man up and risk it all!”

Haruhiro felt his temper rising. “I think it’s better to minimize risks *and* maximize returns as best we can. In fact, that’s what we’ve been doing all along.”

“All along, huh.” Ranta scoffed disdainfully. “I’ll say it right here and now: That’s why we’re rock bottom! Don’t you get it? Guys, look around you!”

“What’s there to see?” Haruhiro said skeptically, but looked around the tavern nonetheless.

When he did, he realized Ranta’s point. Out of all the other Crimson Moon members gathered at Sherry’s, their appearance was the shabbiest of all. But Haruhiro felt they couldn’t do anything about how they looked. Most of their armor and weapons were used, and because they were still living in the shared lodge with no locks, they carried all of their valuables with them.

It didn’t matter whether they were in Damroww or at Sherry’s Tavern; they wore the same clothing no matter where they went. To be sure, it did make their appearance look grungy and dirty.

“Did you guys even think about it before?” Ranta said impatiently, tapping the tabletop with his finger. “So what if Renji’s on a completely different level? He started out when we did! Don’t keep saying shit like ‘there’s nothing we can do about who-what-where’. We’re in a different position now!”

Mogzo dipped his head, and he looked up at Ranta. “What do you mean by that?”

Ranta continued. “From what I hear, a new batch has arrived. We’re not the newest arrivals anymore. Before our group, there was a batch of three. Actually, they haven’t even bought their Crimson Moon contracts yet, but they’re considered something of a deviant case anyway. Now, our group was twelve, but this next group’s even bigger. They’re all still training with their guilds now, but that’s gonna be over soon. They’ll form parties and maybe even start working in Damroww.”

“So what?” Yume replied, pouting. “If they come, let ’em come. If we’re greedy and wanna keep the area all to ourselves what are we gonna do if we get into trouble? And Yume reckons with more parties around, we can all team up and take out bigger gobbie groups.”

Haruhiro acknowledged Yume’s opinion, but Haruhiro found that he couldn’t welcome the newcomers as wholeheartedly as she did. Not counting Mary, Haruhiro’s party was the least experienced of all Crimson Moon members. They couldn’t help it if they were the weakest and most ineffectual.

But it was just as Ranta said. Haruhiro realized they were rock bottom now, and when they were the newest of rookies, maybe there hadn’t been anything they could do about it. But their situation was about to change very soon. They would no longer be the newcomers.

If they took it too easy, they would be surpassed by the new batch. Wasn't that just... beyond pathetic?

"I don't think it's a good idea to be too impatient," Mary said, as if she had read Haruhiro's mind.

Maybe she's right. Even if they wanted to rush to advance, they were only capable of doing so much. Maybe some people could skip stairsteps or leap up entire flights, but not Haruhiro. Running risks would be fine if failure meant they could get back up and dust themselves off, but failure could very well mean death. Better to advance step-by-step, slowly and cautiously.

But... A small voice inside Haruhiro whispered. *Are you sure you're advancing at all? Are you sure you're still moving upwards? Or are you just running circles around the same place?*

"What if," Haruhiro ventured, purposely keeping his gaze down at the table rather than meet anyone's eyes, "and this is a very hypothetical 'if'... but what if we tried somewhere other than Damroww? We can't keep hunting goblins forever, right? I don't think it would be a bad idea to go somewhere else, maybe. Of course we don't have to move, but it seems like we'll get stuck in a rut if we're in Damroww all the time. And if it starts to get monotonous, we might get careless or something like that. I think maybe we'd need something fresh and exciting. But I mean, it's just an idea..."

"Haruhiroooo," said Ranta, grinning from ear to ear, "you come up with some pretty good ideas once in a while. Only just once in a while! And of course I'm completely for it!"

"In that case," Yume replied without skipping a beat, "Yume ain't."

"Then me neither," Shihoru said.

Clearly Yume and Shihoru's rebuff was based on their overriding dislike of Ranta. Mogzo didn't reply right away, but his expression was that of someone deep in thought. What about Mary? What did she think? Haruhiro could glean nothing from either her expression or body language.

"I'm not really proposing anything," Haruhiro said, rubbing the back of his head. "It's just hypothetical. Something to think about, maybe. But we've explored Damroww's Old Town from end to end, and I think maybe it's a good idea to think about what we're going to do next."

"Do next?" Yume fiddled with her twin-braids, pulling them right then left. "If things were nice today, ain't that good enough? What's wrong with doin' the same thing every day? We haven't gotten ourselves into any really dangerous fights lately, and we've been savin' up our money, too. Yume's alright with the way it is."

"That's 'cause you've got no desire to move up in life!" Ranta stuck his tongue out at her. "Maybe you're not even human, 'cause if you were, you'd aim to grow. You're like a pig in its stall!"

"Baby piggies are just darlin'!" Yume shot back. "But once baby piggies become big ol' pigs, they're not as cute, so Yume reckons it's better for them piggies not to grow!"

"What?" Ranta said. "Why are we talking about piglets all of a sudden? What do piglets have anything to do with anything?! I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"That's 'cause Ranta's stupid. Not Yume's fault," Yume replied curtly.

"Quit blaming other people all the time! And I'm not stupid, you're stupid!"

"Idiot! Retard! Jerk!"

"Fuck off!"

"Could both of you please stop?" Mogzo said, but too gently for his words to have any effect.

Haruhiro took a sip of lemonade from his wooden mug. Was he in too much of a hurry to advance? He couldn't completely deny feeling the need to pick up the pace, but he wasn't really considering catching up to Team Renji either. They were on a completely different level, after all. Even so, was it okay for them to just remain the way they were?

He could understand where Yume was coming from, but what if they really were surpassed by the next batch? Haruhiro was definitely not okay with that. Maybe he would be kind of upset if that happened. Perhaps even... quite upset.

What was their main goal? For all practical purposes, it was and had always been survival, at least for the time being. To live from day to day and to maintain at least a minimal standard of living.

They had their Crimson Moon contracts now, so they got to stay at their current lodge for free. It was shabby, but it served to keep the wind and rain out. And since housing was no more than a place to sleep, the money they saved by not finding housing elsewhere was well worth it. Cheap food was available if they were careful in picking the right places, so minimal food expenditures were entirely possible.

But staying in shabby lodgings and scrimping on food made for a hard life. It would be nice if they could rent a room equipped with a lockable door for a month, or even at least a week or so. There were more personal possessions all around lately, so they were carrying a good amount of stuff with them everywhere they went.

If they continued working in Damroww, they would definitely be able to afford better housing... one day. They wouldn't have to take any risks, and they wouldn't have to push themselves too hard. What if they decided to take on a new challenge and ended up meeting disaster?

Maybe they'd die. Not maybe. Meeting disaster meant they'd definitely die, and nothing less. Like Manato. Haruhiro didn't want anyone else to die. He didn't want to make that mistake again, so the current matter needed to be given the utmost gravity.

Which raised the question—if life was at stake, then what was wrong with just doing what they've been doing? However, when Haruhiro thought about it, he realized that after they had bought their Crimson Moon contracts, they weren't returning to Damroww day after day for money to learn new skills with, or spells, or to buy weapons and armor. Not anymore. They were doing it without any real purpose.

Everyone's enthusiasm had been much higher when they were striving to accomplish a real objective. There was a sense of urgency—a need to constantly push themselves to be better. Everyone knew that without becoming stronger, they would never be able to succeed in their desire to avenge Manato.

But those days were over. It was a job well done, a mission completed.

Or so it felt to Haruhiro. Was he able to say that somewhere between then and now, everyone *hadn't* become lax? That everyone *hadn't* become comfortable and complacent?

That wasn't to say that carrying on as they were now was bad. It meant simplicity and an easy life. But Haruhiro couldn't help but think that eventually, it would really come back to bite them in the ass.

When no one offered any further opinions, the discussion ended without reaching any real conclusion.

Shihoru timidly suggested, "Um, should we call it a night?"

Haruhiro and the others got up, said their goodnights to Mary at the exit, and started on their way back to the lodge. Halfway there, Haruhiro stopped.

"You guys go ahead," he told the others. "I'm going to, uh..."

“You’re goin’?” Yume blinked. “Goin’ to what? Something wrong?”

“Err... restroom! Yeah, the restroom! I don’t think I can hold it all the way back, so...”

Ranta snorted lightly. “Just go behind a bush or something. There’s plenty of them around here. We’ll wait for you.”

Why is it, Haruhiro thought with annoyance, *that only when I need him to the least, Ranta thinks to be courteous?* He probably wasn’t doing it on purpose, but it irritated Haruhiro to no end.

“No way I’m going to pee in public,” Haruhiro replied. “I’ll find a shop or something and use their bathroom.”

“Sure, Mr. High-Class-Act,” Ranta scoffed. “Whatever.”

Haruhiro allowed the irksome Ranta return ahead of him with his non-irksome companions, while he doubled back to Sherry’s. He did have a feeling that he had seen Mary reentering the tavern after they’d left earlier and a quick look around upon entering confirmed it.

Mary was sitting alone at the far end of the bar. He approached her now and indicated the seat next to her. “Mary. Can I sit?”

Mary seemed a little surprised, but nodded. “Sure. Didn’t you all leave?”

“I thought the same for you,” Haruhiro replied with a slight smile as he settled into the chair next to her. “You’re actually drinking? Something alcoholic?”

As if a little embarrassed, Mary dropped her gaze and pulled the ceramic mug closer to herself. “I was in the mood for one last cup of mead.”

“Is mead that honey liquor? Then I think I’ll have one too.”

The whole reason Haruhiro returned was to talk to Mary about a certain subject, yet he found it hard to start. Though it had been quite a difficult subject to broach with everyone else present, for different reasons it was quite a difficult subject with everyone gone, too.

The serving girl returned with the mead. It wasn’t honey colored, but reddish. Other ingredients must have been added to it. Haruhiro took a drink and discovered it to be sweet with a hint of sour.

“It’s flavored with a bit of raspberry syrup,” Mary informed him.

“Ah, I see. I thought it tasted a bit fruity. It’s good.”

“Is something the matter?”

“Err...”

Pathetic, Haruhiro scolded himself. His inability to start the conversation was pathetic. *I suck. I completely suck.*

“Mary, you’ve been in lots of parties, right? I just wanted to ask...”

Haruhiro thought he might have seen a change in Mary’s expression, and knew right away that he had blundered. Mary was a committed team member now, but that did not mean she had left her past behind, nor that she had returned to the cheery self she used to be. It was understandable not to want reminders of those events past, and Haruhiro regretted it.

But Mary gave him a tiny shake of her head and said, “It’s alright. Don’t worry about it.”

“Really? I don’t want to make you uncomfortable because—well, I don’t want to, uh, y’know—I mean, I’m the one who brought the whole thing up—” Haruhiro was blabbering nervously.

“What did you want to ask me?”

Maybe he was just reading too much into it, but Mary’s expression seemed to harden. Stopping now, however, would make it worse.

“I was just wondering,” Haruhiro said carefully, “what you think about our party. How well we do. Wait, actually, not ‘we’. Just me.”

“How well you do in what, Haru?”

“Err... It’s kinda strange for me to talk about myself this way, but I’m, you know, sorta kinda the leader?”

“Sort of, kind of? You’re *not* the leader?”

“Um, maybe? I’m acting like it and doing leader-like things, but...”

Mary closed her eyes, thought about it for a moment, and then said, “From my experience, leaders can be divided into two general types.”

“Types?”

“The Dictator and the Executive. I just made these names up, so don’t take them too seriously.”

Haruhiro nodded. “The Dictator is like someone strong, right? Someone that leads by dragging people along by force? Or something like that?”

“Precisely. Most of them possess very fierce, uncompromising personalities, and they have the ability to force loyalty from others. The others in the party operate according to their will, and their will alone—and if they fail to obey, then they are either punished or thrown out of the party. Members who can’t be completely happy with that person’s leadership don’t last.”

Renji’s that type of leader, Haruhiro realized. *No one would dare disobey him.*

“And the Executive is the opposite?” Haruhiro asked. “More diplomatic?”

“That’s right. They’re charismatic and eloquent; very good at taking the opinions of others into account. They don’t have to be especially strong or skilled at combat, and in fact they can be pretty useless at fighting altogether. At first glance, it seems strange that that type of person can lead, but it’s them who can settle disputes and bring everyone together as a team.”

“Right. The Dictator and the Executive. Got it. And... which one am I?”

He was definitely not the Dictator type; that much he knew beyond a doubt. So that left Executive? But he wasn’t really personable, and neither was he particularly articulate. He didn’t consider himself to be charismatic, and even if he did possess a certain amount of willpower, it wasn’t really enough to inspire loyalty.

But even though Haruhiro knew that he was lacking in many areas, if there was a type he aspired to become, it was the Executive.

Which type had Manato been? No matter how he thought about it, Manato was definitely the strongest fighter in their party. However, he didn't drag anyone else along. Everyone just naturally obeyed and followed him.

"Is there something like a type that's between Dictator and Executive?" Haruhiro asked.

"Of course," Mary replied. "I was overgeneralizing just now. There's no clear line separating the two. There's the archetypal Dictator, but there are also leaders who possess a mix of Dictator and Executive traits. Sometimes, it depends on the situation too."

"In other words, everyone is different. And you can be anywhere on the continuum."

"Yes. Sorry, I know my answer is not really helpful," Mary added.

"No, it's helpful," Haruhiro reassured her. "If I had to pick one, I'd say I'm the Executive type, I think. Right?"

"I think so, yes."

"Hmm," Haruhiro shifted his gaze up towards the ceiling. "I think that as an Executive, maybe I need to be more assertive. And say things like, 'I *want* to do this, I *want* to do that, it's *better* if we do,' or something. Within the team, isn't the only person who really speaks his mind Ranta of all people? The rest of us, myself included—we just kind of passively go with the flow."

"You feel a little lost?"

"Well, it's not that I feel not lost—" Haruhiro cut himself off. "Ah, you see? I just keep going back and forth."

The corners of Mary's mouth seemed to quiver ever so slightly. Suddenly, Haruhiro was reminded once more of how beautiful Mary was. And it was just the two of them, all by themselves... No, if he thought about stuff like that now, he'd confuse himself and things would get awkward.

Was it really okay for him to be here now? He couldn't really help but think that, despite how it looked, Mary wasn't comfortable with him here.

"...Do you feel like you're unwelcome?" Mary inquired.

"Uh, I said that?"

"I thought you said something like that. Perhaps it's just me," Mary said.

Haruhiro forced himself to smile. Careless. He was thinking aloud and Mary almost heard it. *I need to get a better grip on myself*, he thought. *I can't keep messing up like this*. He was the party's leader so he had to live up to the role.

But it wasn't like he was the leader because he wanted to be. He was the leader because he had no choice.

"About the conversation earlier..." Mary began.

Haruhiro realized it then. Mary was definitely being considerate of him. He was making her concerned for his sake.

"R-right," Haruhiro forced his expression to become blank again. "Earlier? What do you mean?"

"About working somewhere other than Damroww."

“Oh. Yume and Shihoru were against it because Ranta was for it, so the discussion stopped there. Stupid Ranta.”

“If you’re not suggesting it out of impatience, then I think it’s an option worth considering,” Mary said.

In truth though, Haruhiro admitted maybe a part of him was in a bit of a hurry to advance. He wanted to be honest with Mary, but he also didn’t want to look lame, especially to her. But maybe it was already too late for that.

“I see. But if we were to go to someplace different, then where?”

It was almost as if she had the answer prepared.

“The Siren Mines,” Mary said simply, without hesitation. Her expression was completely blank.

“But that’s where...” Haruhiro began. But he fell silent. Wasn’t the Siren Mines where Mary’s previous teammates had died? There she had fought Deathpatch and his kobold minions and lost three companions. He recalled Michiki the Warrior, Ogg the Thief, and Mutsumi the Mage.

What had become of them? Retrieving their bodies should have been impossible. And because their bodies hadn’t been burned, they would have fallen under the Curse of the Deathless King. Wasn’t it better to avoid such a place? Or perhaps it really was the logical next place to go? Haruhiro had no idea where to even start in considering the issue.

He ended up asking Mary various questions regarding kobolds before calling it a night and heading out.

I really... suck at these things, Haruhiro thought to himself.

At any rate, it wasn’t a decision that had to be made right away, so he decided to give it more serious thought after his head had cooled down a bit. That was the plan, but that wasn’t how it would turn out.

It was back to Damroww’s Old Town the following day.

Chapter 3: The Law of Resisting Your Inertia

“Whoa! Whoa-whoa-whoa! What the hell?!” Ranta grumbled through his bucket helm, his back pressed tight against a crumbling wall.

Ranta wasn't alone. Haruhiro and the rest were all keeping themselves flat against the wall with him, trying to keep their presences hidden.

“Any idea what's going on here?” Haruhiro turned to his side, looking at Mary.

Mary gave a tiny shake of her head. “Even I have no idea.”

“There's an awful lot of gobbies,” Yume whispered.

Mogzo grunted his agreement. He was trembling all over as he did his best to make himself as small as possible.

Shihoru had her eyes closed and appeared to be praying, her staff held close to her chest. “...We can't, we can't... there's no way we can...”

Shihoru was right. If there was one phrase that could sum this situation up, it was “we can't.”

They were in the same Old Town area of Damroww as usual, but today it wasn't just scattered, sporadically distributed groups of goblins. Something had felt different the moment they got here—no, even before they came, something had felt off.

The place was chock-full of goblins. It was a massive gathering, and they even seemed to have organized themselves into units. Maybe they were even sending out regular patrols.

“Patrols...” Haruhiro murmured, gritting his teeth.

Could it be possible? Could his hunch be right? The goblins gathered here now looked different from the usual ones Haruhiro and the others hunted every day. They had better equipment, for starters. And while the usual goblins always looked lazy and bored, these ones seemed alert and active.

Haruhiro guessed that they must have been from Damroww's Upper City. Goblins exiled from the Upper City often came to Old Town, but those goblins always looked... sullen. Morose, even. Even the hobgoblin and its plate-armored master had had an air of gloominess about them.

But the goblins gathered here now were lively and high-spirited. They seemed like they were here with a purpose. Haruhiro wouldn't be surprised if they were here under some kind of orders.

“Hmph,” snorted Ranta. There he went again, trying to act cool or something. He wasn't cool in the least. “Looks like we overdid it. We drew a bit too much attention to ourselves around here...”

No one bothered to give him the satisfaction of a response, Haruhiro included. He didn't have the energy to waste on silly things like that. But it was too dangerous to continue working here. Even though they had come all this way, they were now faced with the depressing prospect of returning to Altana with nothing.

There wasn't really any other option. With things the way they were, there seemed to be no choice but to go back. Unless... when he thought about it, Haruhiro realized that he should see this turn of events as an

opportunity for a change of pace. Maybe Haruhiro was being forced into this decision, or being swept along with the tide, but it could still be a good chance anyway.

“Hey guys,” Haruhiro began. “What do you think of going to check out the Siren Mines? It’s a bit out of the way, but it’s in the same direction. We can just take a detour around the rest of Damroww and keep heading northwest.”

Ranta was thrilled. Yume, Shihoru, Mogzo, and Mary weren’t against it, so they headed off. The Siren Mines... They were around two and a half miles northwest of Damroww, but since Haruhiro and the others had never been there before, it took them almost two hours to arrive even after taking the most direct route.

It looked the same as any other mountain. Long ago, when the human Aravakia Kingdom was still in control of the frontier, they put a good amount of resources into building the mine. Afterwards, when the Deathless King and his confederation forced the humans from the area, the Boshuu kobold faction took over and moved in. Currently, the Siren Mines were completely occupied by kobolds.

Haruhiro’s party could see the way into the mines from the foot of the mountain. The entrance itself was square and tunnel-like, and had sides reinforced by wooden beams. Haruhiro and the others were following a small river running parallel to the mountain path when they spotted a bear ambling about.

Haruhiro doubted that it would attack; wild animals were supposed to be cautious to the point of cowardice. However, no one wanted to test their luck, so they gave it a wide berth.

They continued up the mountain, following an animal trail into a forested area. A little ways in, they caught sight of two furry, humanoid creatures with dog-like heads. Each was outfitted patchily, in worn chainmail armor, and armed with rusted swords.

No one had been expecting to run into any trouble. Certainly not the two creatures, who had appeared from the shadowed tree line very relaxed. Clearly they hadn’t been expecting to meet anyone here either. The creatures and Haruhiro’s party stared at each other, both sides frozen for a good two or three seconds.

“Kobolds!” shouted Mary.

Haruhiro unconsciously let out a surprised yelp and instinctively scrambled backwards.

“Mogzo, let’s go!” Ranta said, swinging his sword at the kobold on the right.

“R-right!” Mogzo, whose reaction lagged a bit behind Ranta’s, closed in on the kobold on his left.

Haruhiro thumped his own chest—*Column!* No. Wait. Not column, calm! *Calm down!* Damn it. He wasn’t calm at all.

“Shihoru, Mary, stay back for now!” Haruhiro ordered. “Yume, let’s go backup Ranta and Mogzo!”

Yume answered with something that Haruhiro couldn’t really make out, but was right in step with him as they got into position at the front. In the meantime, Ranta was furiously hacking at a kobold, accentuating each swing of his sword with a shout.

Mogzo grunted in effort as he lifted and whirled his bastard sword overhead, but he wasn’t even close to landing a hit on his target kobold.

“Yume, to Mogzo!” said Haruhiro.

“Got it!”

Haruhiro focused on the back of the kobold Ranta had engaged. His plan was to finish off one of the kobolds quickly, and then all jump on the second and kill it deader than dead.

“What the—?” Haruhiro muttered.

What was going on? Were kobolds supposed to be tough enemies? Strong and fast? For some reason, Haruhiro couldn’t get into position at its back. His eyes weren’t able to keep track of it, making it difficult for him to anticipate its movements.

“Fuck!” Ranta cried. “Haruhiro, what’re you doing?!”

Ranta was fully occupied by the kobold, but he wasn’t on the offensive. If anything, he was steadily being pushed back. The kobold was doing most of the attacking while Ranta defended, unable to counter.

What about Mogzo and Yume? Damn, he couldn’t check. Haruhiro didn’t have the luxury of looking away. He needed to focus on the kobold in front of him and figure out what to do.

“Ranta! Quit moving around so much!” Haruhiro shouted.

“Shut up! I’ve got my own problems to deal with!”

“But if it keeps moving around like that, I can’t...!”

“Like I care! Whoa!”

The kobold suddenly took a big step forward and locked blades with Ranta. Both of them had stopped moving. It was now or never.

“[BACKSTAB!]”

Haruhiro’s dagger seemed as if it was about to slide neatly into to kobold’s back, but it didn’t. It had been swatted aside. How? What happened? It was the kobold, it had sprung sideways and used its tail to slap the dagger away. That was just downright sneaky.

“You’re frickin’ useless, Haruhiro!” Ranta shouted.

Ranta chased after the kobold. It moved using short, hopping motions, zipping left, then right, and then darting in nimbly to attack Ranta. The way the kobold moved was maddening to deal with. And Haruhiro, positioned directly behind it, found its tail to be the most troublesome. The thing’s tail never stopped moving and forced Haruhiro to keep a wary eye on it.

“Why is it this hard...” he wondered.

It probably had nothing to do with how strong or weak they were. The problem was that Haruhiro and the others knew nothing about kobolds. How did kobolds prefer to attack? How did they defend? How should he react if the kobold did this or that? How would the kobold react if he pressed the attack? No one had the slightest idea.

“If it were goblins, we’d—!” someone cried.

That’s right... Haruhiro realized something for the first time. He was targeting the kobold’s back as if it was a goblin. In fights, all he ever thought about were goblins. When looking at the kobold’s back, his mind’s eye saw a goblin’s back. A goblin’s body. A goblin’s manners, movements, and mentality. Goblins colored his perception of everything and he found himself unable to detach himself from that mindset.

We’ve gotten too used to goblins, and nothing else... he admitted.

“[SMASH]!” Mary had unexpectedly jumped into the fray.

She landed a crippling blow with her staff on the shoulder of the kobold that Mogzo and Yume were facing. The kobold shrieked and jumped far away in a single, powerful leap. It half-barked, half-howled at them.

“These are lesser kobolds! They’re not supposed to be tough opponents!” Mary said, thrusting the butt of her staff into the ground with a heavy thud. “If you keep calm, there’s no reason we shouldn’t win!”

Whoa. Mary. So cool... But now wasn’t the time to stand around admiring her!

Haruhiro exchanged glances with Ranta. It disturbed him to think that he and Ranta could understand each other without actual words, but they were teammates after all. When fighting side by side, it seemed as if they knew exactly what the other was thinking.

Watch it closely... he told himself. *Focus!*

The opponent was a kobold, not a goblin. An as-of-yet unknown, but just because they lacked the information, it didn’t mean that Haruhiro and the others couldn’t handle them. It was just as Mary said: they were not strong opponents.

“Oom rel eckt vel dash!” Shihoru cast the [SHADOW ECHO] spell, and *voash!* A frizzy, black shadow elemental flew towards the kobold that was closing in on Yume and Mogzo.

The kobold went to its knees, its entire body shaking uncontrollably.



“Mogzo, now!” Yume cried.

Mogzo rushed towards the disabled kobold. Haruhiro judged that he could leave the rest up to them and focus on his. Ranta was on the offensive, shouting with every strike. Unlike before, he wasn’t randomly swinging his longsword around anymore, but rather watching his opponent intently.

When the kobold jumped to the right, Ranta followed. When it went left, so did Ranta. He couldn’t quite get a step ahead of the thing’s movements, but he wasn’t allowing the kobold to dominate him anymore. Nor was he stuck on the defensive; he was getting in some attacks now and then.

Because of that, the kobold’s full attention was now solely on Ranta. Now Haruhiro would be able to get into position perfectly at its back. *Don’t get distracted by its tail!* he told himself. *It’s just a tail, come on!*

Goblins were similar in build to humans, but kobolds were more like wild animals. They had muscular legs, and they could jump, just like those legs were coiled springs. Haruhiro felt they were faster than goblins by a notch or two as well. But the time it took them to go from still to moving—in other words, their reaction speed and reflexes—were comparable to that of goblins.

A kobold’s body was also not as limber as a goblin’s. When he looked closely, Haruhiro noticed that when a kobold bent over, its upper body was actually kept quite straight and stiff. Kobolds also handled their swords differently. Goblins made use of their entire body when swinging a sword, but kobolds used only their arms. They depended on the flexibility of those arms, making it seem like their shoulder joints lacked a full range of motion.

They were around five feet tall, so they were a little larger than goblins, but in terms of the force they put behind their blows, goblins might’ve been stronger. However, while goblins put the full weight of their bodies behind their blows, a kobold’s attacks were fast and compact. If they fought kobolds the way they fought goblins, they would forever be on the defensive.

But just because they were so different, that didn’t mean that kobolds were the superior opponent. Haruhiro’s party could take on five goblins at a time now. Two kobolds were nothing.

We can definitely do this. There’s no reason we can’t win.

And that wasn’t overconfidence talking either. It was a conclusion achieved through current observations and past experiences.

Earlier, just watching Ranta and the kobold he was fighting took up all his attention. Now, he could see everyone and had a general idea of how they were moving and what they were doing. It was like his field of vision had expanded.

It’s amazing... Haruhiro thought. *It’s amazing what can happen when you calm down and trust that you can win.*

“THANK... YOU!” Mogzo put the entirety of his strength behind [RAGE CLEAVE]’s diagonal swing and instantly cut down the kobold.

There’s no way the surviving kobold won’t hesitate after seeing its buddy getting brought down like that... Haruhiro predicted.

He was right. For the briefest of moments, the remaining kobold stopped paying attention to its rear. Haruhiro took in a breath, held it, and rammed himself into the kobold’s back. But he didn’t merely tackle the kobold. [BACKSTAB]. He drove his dagger through an opening in the chain link armor, deep into the kobold’s body.

The kobold let out a half cry, half yelping noise. Haruhiro leapt away from it immediately.

“All right!” Ranta stepped in, longsword already in motion. “[ANGER THRUST]!”

Ranta drove his longsword into the base of the kobold’s throat. He had done it. It collapsed right there and then, falling completely silent.

Haruhiro let out the breath he had been holding. “... We won.”

“AND IT’S ALL THANKS TO ME!” And Ranta lifted his sword and spun it, showboating.

“No it ain’t,” Yume said, disgusted. “It’s all thanks to Mary. Back when she was sayin’ how we should keep calm, how there’s no reason we shouldn’t win... It was amazin’! My spine went all tingly and it was like a fire lit up inside me.”

“S-stop,” Mary said with her head turned towards the ground, her face red with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I said too much. It’s not really my place...”

“Don’t say that!” Shihoru said with unusual force. “That’s not... I don’t think you have any reason to apologize.”

“A-agreed,” Mogzo nodded slowly. “I felt a lot braver hearing that.”

“You guys are pathetic!” Ranta spat.

How was Ranta able to act so high and mighty all the time? Haruhiro really didn’t have the slightest idea... Maybe it was just because he was an idiot.

Ranta didn’t let up. “You guys are telling me that unless someone says the magic word, Mogzo turns into a chicken and Yume can’t get her ass moving? Fuck that!”

Haruhiro ignored him, making his way over to the kobold corpse instead. He crouched down on one knee. “The armor and weapons look worthless, but it’s got some kind of nose stud... Looks like it’s made from an animal fang or something.”

Mary crouched down beside Haruhiro after making the signature Priest’s hexagon gesture that showed her respect for the dead.

“That’s a talisman,” she explained. “All kobolds carry at least one.”

“Really?” replied Haruhiro. “Doesn’t look like it’ll fetch much of a price though.”

“Kobolds that live on the first stratum of the mines are in the lowest echelon of kobold society. They dress in rags and barely receive enough to eat. We Crimson Moon members call them ‘lesser kobolds’.”

“What about the non-lesser kobolds? Their talismans are more valuable?”

“Yes. They are made from precious stones and metals. But sometimes lesser kobolds take human money, like coppers and silvers, and use them for talismans too.”

“I see. So it’s like a raffle. Sometimes we might find a lesser kobold with a silver or something...”

Mary had said quite a bit. It wasn’t just the information either... the very fact that she was talking to him made Haruhiro quite happy.

“Whatever. Let’s just grab it and go,” Ranta snorted. He tore the talisman roughly off the nose of the kobold’s corpse, earning him a look of displeasure from Haruhiro. “What? You got a problem?”

“...No.”

Even if they were retrieving a well-deserved victory prize from the body of an enemy they had defeated, Haruhiro wished that Ranta would be more... It was then Haruhiro realized something: to the kobolds, they were the invaders. What they were doing now was akin to murder. No amount of goodwill after the fact would make up for that.

Whether they took the loot off the corpses with care or ripped it off with abandon, the end result was the same. It didn't change what they were doing. But watching Ranta now made Haruhiro realize just how morally indifferent to it he had become as well. The understanding was hard to bear.

Ranta might not have had any qualms about thinking like this, but Haruhiro was determined not to be the same, even at the risk of being a hypocrite. So Haruhiro removed the talisman—an earring made out of polished animal horn or something—gently, doing his best not to further damage the kobold's body.

He had no intention of changing the way he did things. It didn't matter if it was an enemy or even an animal. The dead were owed at least a minimal level of respect.

Haruhiro drew himself up once more. “Let's go. To the Siren Mines.”

Chapter 4: Pitch-Black Style

It had “mine” in the name, after all. Naturally, there would be a tunnel-like shaft that led into the mountain, and of course the tunnel was going to be pitch black. Or so Haruhiro had assumed, only to be proven flat out wrong.

Flowers bloomed all along the tunnel road; not normal flowers, but ones that radiated emerald light. According to Mary, they were called “glow blossoms” and were exactly what the name implied. Upon closer inspection, they were really more like beds of moss; whatever they were, though, it was because of them that the mine shaft wasn’t completely dark. Not brightly lit, but navigable.

“Do you guys think we can...” Ranta plucked up a few, expression thoughtful as he promptly put them inside his mouth—then spat them out violently. “BLEH! Tastes like crap! Bitter and shit.”

“Quit messing around,” Haruhiro sighed.

“What?” Ranta replied, wiping off his mouth. “I just wanted to try them.”

“Why would doing that even occur to you?”

“No idea. The mood was a little boring, so I decided to make up for it. You’re welcome.”

“You didn’t make up for anything,” said Haruhiro exasperatedly. “There was nothing wrong with the mood, and if there was, it was probably your fault!”

“WHAT. Don’t say stupid shit like that. How is it my fault? Quit trying to blame others for everything!”

“Haru, you’re better off not botherin’,” Yume said, tugging on Haruhiro’s sleeve. “Nothin’ gets through that thick skull of his so don’t waste your breath.”

Haruhiro nodded. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“Hey!” Ranta shouted. “Don’t just—! OY!”

“It’s best to be quiet,” Mary said softly, glaring at Ranta. “We’re in enemy territory now.”

Ranta scrunched his brows together and twisted his lips into a grim expression. “It’s best to be quiet,” he mimicked, sniggering. “Really quiet. Shut the hell up. I don’t want to hear a single word, got it?”

“Little punk,” Shihoru murmured under her breath.

“What did you say?!” Ranta demanded, veins at his temple bulging.

“Quit it, Ranta,” Haruhiro said, tone unintentionally gruff. “We’re not here to screw around. If something happens, one of us might get killed.”

Ranta turned away, perhaps out of embarrassment, and replied, “No need to tell me, I already know.”

“Do you?” Haruhiro challenged. “Do you really?”

Haruhiro was furious. *Is it okay?* he couldn’t help thinking. *Is it really okay to keep Ranta in the party?*

For the sake of the team, shouldn't they kick Ranta out sooner rather than later? It wasn't that he couldn't fight or didn't contribute, but he seemed to go out of his way to piss everyone off every chance he got. He caused friction and stressed the team out. Didn't his cons outweigh his pros? Wasn't he doing them more harm than good?

Now might have been a good time to think about it. However, if he started down that line of thought, then a decision would have to be made.

As they made their way down the tunnel, they ran into three lesser kobolds barring the way. The kobolds seemed frightened, but they held their ground. After Mogzo and Ranta each dispatched one, the third fled.

Kobolds usually walked upright on two legs, but when they ran, they loped, using their weaponless arm as a third leg. While it was strange, their weird way of running actually made them very fast, so chasing after the fleeing kobold was difficult and put everyone on edge. They would be in big trouble if other kobolds attacked.

Fortunately, they were able to run it down and finish it off without any mishaps. Haruhiro made a mental note of the kobolds' running speed for next time; it might take a while, but it would be great if they could become as proficient with kobolds as with goblins. They just needed more experience.

"The Siren Mines extend more than ten strata deep." Mary's voice echoed from the walls and seemed to reverberate in his chest. "Here on the first stratum, ore deposits have long since been depleted, and all that's left are glow blossoms. The lowest of the lesser kobolds live here. Mining shafts used to lead to lower strata, but they're no longer accessible due to cave-ins. The only way to get to the second stratum now is using the sink wells."

"Sink wells?" Shihoru asked.

Mary nodded. "That's what we Crimson Moon members call them. They're just vertical shafts between strata. From the third stratum down, the shafts are installed with gondola lifts, but for the most part we use the sink wells to move between strata."

Mogzo exhaled through his nose and said, "Is it because security is tight around the lifts?"

"Yes. Kobolds are divided into three types: lesser kobolds, normal kobolds, and the large elders. Only elders are allowed to use the lifts freely. Normal kobolds can only use the lifts when ordered to or permitted by an elder."

"Yume gets the feelin' these eldie guys think they're all that," Yume remarked.

Yume being Yume, Haruhiro guessed that she felt a tiny bit sorry for normal kobolds.

Mary's expression softened slightly as she explained. "Elders are the elite class while kobolds are the worker class. Lesser kobolds are not even considered full members of their society. The lower ranks of worker kobolds make their residence starting on the second strata. That's where things start to get tough."

"So it's from here on out, huh..." Haruhiro licked his suddenly dry lips.

They stopped when they reached a large, roughly circular opening. So this was a sink well. It was a vertical hole about ten feet in diameter with four rope ladders attached at its ledges. Haruhiro gulped, wanting to descend and also not.

But while Haruhiro wavered, Ranta was already going down a ladder.

"Ranta, hold up..." Haruhiro called.

“What?” Ranta glared at him. “Why hesitate? We’ve come this far so there’s no point in stopping now. It’s not even a question, so hurry up! If you don’t stop being a baby, I’ll leave you behind.”

“Or maybe we’ll just leave *you* behind down there,” Haruhiro retorted.

“I’ll frickin’ kill you if you do. I’m not even kidding.”

And that was that. Haruhiro and the others grabbed rope ladders and began going down. The general appearance of the second stratum was much less plain than the first. One could still see that it used to be a mine, but numerous hollows were cut into the walls. Haruhiro guessed they were probably kobold worker dwellings.

His guess was quickly confirmed when they snuck a peek into one of the hollows and, much to their dismay, discovered kobolds snoring inside.

“Aren’t we pretty screwed if we wake them?” he whispered. “Looks like there’s a lot in just this one hollow...”

Before anyone could reply, the sound of snarling dogs echoed in the distance. Were the kobolds fighting amongst themselves? That’s what it seemed like. The howling soon died down, but it wasn’t long before more howling started from a different direction.

“Yume didn’t think they’d be so noisy,” Yume said, not sounding particularly concerned.

“S-shouldn’t we go back now?” Shihoru clung tightly onto to Yume, entire body trembling.

“It’s all right,” Mary said calmly. “It’s always loud down here, so unless it’s something out of the ordinary, they won’t wake up. Even if we made a little noise, they rarely group to give chase.”

Mogzo sighed in relief.

“Though that only applies to the second stratum,” she amended with a slight smile. “We must be wary of the elders, beginning with the third stratum. And then there’s Deathpatch.”

It wasn’t just Haruhiro. Even Ranta’s expression hardened the moment they heard that name. A kobold with patchy black and white fur, bigger and more brutal than any elder, who wandered the mines with his entourage. The name came from both his fur and the Crimson Moon members he had killed, including Mary’s former companions. And to Mary, the name must have been synonymous with revenge.

Whoever killed such a creature would become the talk of the town. Since no such talk had been heard, he must still be alive.

“It’s said that he’s been spotted as far up as the first stratum,” Mary continued, her tone calm as ever. Haruhiro thought her serenity rather odd, as if she was forcing herself to remain impassive. “But the reports are dubious, so I don’t think we should be overly concerned at the moment. Beyond this stratum, however, we must never forget to keep the presence of Deathpatch in mind. If we don’t start to run at the first sight of him...”

“You mean *this*?” Ranta, grinning broadly, made a throat slashing motion with his hand.

“Knock it off!” Yume punched Ranta in the shoulder.

“Ow! What was that for?!”

“Why can’t you act a bit more sensible?” she demanded.

“What? How am I not? You won’t find anyone with more sensational sense than me!”

“Try sayin’ that after you stop your stand-up comedy routines,” Yume snapped.

“Yume, if you’re gonna say that, you might as well say you can’t stand him outright,” straight-man Haruhiro cut in, but rather wished he had let them keep bickering.

He cleared his throat and looked over at Mary. She looked like her usual self, but Haruhiro wondered if she was really okay. He had a feeling she was the type who kept her emotions bottled up.

“At any rate,” Haruhiro continued, “Ranta, unless you have something constructive to say, just keep quiet.”

“Then how about I make a suggestion. Let’s go for those guys,” Ranta said, using his chin to indicate the kobold workers asleep in the hollows. “They won’t wake unless we make a lot of noise, right? So let’s just kill them in their sleep. It’ll be easy—*stab, stab, stab*, then we take the loot and leave.”

Haruhiro was at a momentary loss for words. Finally, he responded, “You have no sense of morality whatsoever.”

“Morality ain’t got nothing to do with it. I’m a Dread Knight—a servant of Skulheill. We believe that all things are equal before Death. The Vices we collect are the opposite, the constrastitation of common sense and morals and everything you consider good. The constrastitation. This is important, so I’ll say it again: CONTRASTITATION. Though all are equally embraced by Death, to be bound by its absurdity just makes fools of us all. Can’t take it, right? For if there’s anything we can let in, it’s our desires, base instincts, primal urges, and stuff like that. It’s there that impartial Death awaits. Understand?”

“No,” Haruhiro said. “And I don’t even want to try.”

“Haruhiro... You need to train yourself more. Your brain, I mean. There’s no way you can be our leader with your current level of comprehension skills. Just a piece of advice from the bottom of my heart, because I’m a nice person.”

Wow. What? What am I even supposed to do with this? I really really REALLY want to punch the living daylights out of him.

Had Ranta simply been taken in by the Dread Knights’ teachings? No, that couldn’t have explained everything. Ranta was supposed to have joined the Warrior’s guild, but he changed his mind and ran off to the Dread Knights instead. He did it after having volunteered for the Warrior position, fully aware that a party couldn’t be without one and without consulting anyone else beforehand. All because he thought Dread Knights were “cool”.

The only explanation was that Ranta had been selfish from the start. Selfishness was part of his nature; his personality, his natural disposition. There was no fixing or changing it. Ranta would always be that way.

Would they be able to keep going like this? To be honest, Haruhiro didn’t entirely believe they could. If he couldn’t be confident that Ranta could change for the better, then it was over. It was for Ranta’s sake too. This wasn’t the time or place to make such decisions, but...

But even so, *Sorry Ranta, you’re out* was not something Haruhiro could just say right now. Kicking Ranta out here in the mines would drag Haruhiro down to his level.

“Suggestion rejected,” he said instead. “No need to even put it up for a vote, right?”

The others nodded vigorously. Everyone except Ranta.

“Whatever,” Ranta scoffed. “I figured as much.”

“Then don’t suggest it in the first place,” Haruhiro said.

“I’m doing you guys a favor by thinking of stuff you guys would never think of. You just don’t understand my fatherly concern for everyone.”

“What kind of parent do you think you are?” Haruhiro countered.

It would never end if he kept replying. Really, he should never have replied to start with.

They continued on. There were supposed to be five sink wells to the third stratum scattered here, and they explored hoping to find one. Suddenly, they ran into a group of four low-ranked worker kobolds carrying shovels and picks over their shoulders. They must have been on their way back from work.

“Four?! That’s too many!” Haruhiro engaged one immediately, only to have the kobold block his dagger with a whirl of its shovel.

It counterattacked with the same shovel, once, twice... four times in quick succession. Haruhiro aimed for the tool, countering each of the incoming thrusts with the Thief’s fighting technique, [SWAT]. Defending this way wore his weapon out quickly so he tried to avoid using it too much, but there was no other choice right now.

How was everyone else doing? Mogzo, Ranta, and Yume had each paired off with a kobold, and, for several seconds, neither side had an advantage.

“Oom rel eckt vel dash!” *Voash!* Shihoru’s [SHADOW ECHO] spell slammed into Mogzo’s opponent. The worker kobold’s body began to tremble and it dropped its defenses for the slightest moment.

Mogzo didn’t miss his chance. “THANK YOU—!” he cried, unleashing [RAGE CLEAVE], also known as the “thank-you-for-letting-me-kill-you attack”.

Haruhiro never really paid attention to anyone else’s personal improvement, but looking at Mogzo now he had to say that [RAGE CLEAVE] was, without a doubt, more accurate and deadly than ever before. Mogzo felled the kobold with that single blow and immediately headed towards Yume.

Just as Haruhiro was thinking, *Good. We can do this*, something slammed into his back.

“What the—! Haruhiro, you bastard!” Ranta raged at him.

“Ranta! Pay more attention to your surroundings!” Haruhiro shot back.

“Look who’s talking!”

“Fine! Sorry!”

“You better be!”

Everything Ranta said pissed him off. Haruhiro had apologized first. Was it too much to expect an apology in return?

“THANK YOU!” Mogzo finished off another.

With that, both Yume and Mogzo were now free to help, but Ranta shouted, “I’m fine! I’ll take this one down by myself! Go save eediot Haruhiro’s ass!”

“Eediot? What the hell was that supposed to mean?!”

Seriously what the hell I can't stand it anymore I can't believe him he's the worst, the absolute worst! Blood in his veins boiled on the brink of explosion, he was that pissed off.

But Mogzo and Yume were coming and he needed to focus on the job at hand. The kobold was turning to face them, giving Haruhiro a chance to slip behind it. Now!

“[BACKSTAB]!”

But it was no good. The point of his dagger hit bone. Haruhiro bit his lip in frustration and jumped back. Even if it wasn't fatal, the kobold couldn't ignore the wound and hesitated between turning back to Haruhiro or continuing to face Yume and Mogzo; the result was that it faced neither side fully. Mogzo made his move then.

“THANK YOUUU—!”

Three kobolds, three explosive [RAGE CLEAVE]s in a row. Haruhiro watched as Mogzo's sword ripped violently through the kobold's right shoulder.

“Mogzo, you're amazin'!” Yume shouted, and Haruhiro agreed. Mogzo really was incredible.

Some might have looked at Mogzo and seen only muscle and no grace. Some might even say he was dimwitted and slow, but Mogzo was earnest and trustworthy. Holding his opponents back with sword and armor, he either searched for openings or got them to lock blades with him before using [SPIRAL SLASH] to force them back, breaking their balance. Then he finished them off with [RAGE CLEAVE].

There wasn't much variety to his fighting style, but because he didn't mind using the same techniques over and over, they had become highly refined. Of everyone on the team, Mogzo's had polished his skills the most.

“[PROPEL LEAP]!” Ranta readied himself before leaping backwards, drawing the remaining kobold forward with him like a vacuum. From there, Ranta thrust out his longsword: “[JUKE STAB]!”

The kobold twisted its body aside, avoiding the attack. Ranta leapt back once again: “[PROPEL LEAP]!”

For a brief moment, it seemed like the kobold would get sucked forward again but it didn't. Of course it didn't. There was no way something like that would work twice.

“Fucking bastard! Then eat this!” Ranta took a large, hopping step forward and swung his longsword at a diagonal. “[HATRED'S CUT]!”

The sound of metal on metal rang through the air as the kobold deflected Ranta's sword with its pickaxe. Ranta took two, three steps back. “Not bad for a scraggly mutt,” he scoffed. “Fine then. I accept you as my rival!”

The kobold bared its fangs at him, growling in a low tone.

“Oh?” Shihoru whispered dryly. “Rival, huh...”

“Feeling good about yourself, eh?!” Ranta shouted at the kobold.

How is it feeling good? Haruhiro was tempted to ask, but refrained from opening his mouth. It was dumb to even think about it.

“But—! I'll finish you in the next move!” Ranta leapt. “[HATRED'S CUT]!”

The kobold evaded and counterattacked. Ranta responded by using [PROPEL LEAP] to avoid it, then [JUKE STAB]. He cut nothing but air.

[HATRED'S CUT], [PROPEL LEAP], [ANGER THRUST], [PROPEL LEAP], [ANGER THRUST], then [PROPEL LEAP] again. After another [ANGER THRUST], [PROPEL LEAP], then [ANGER THRUST] and [PROPEL LEAP].

[HATRED'S CUT], [PROPEL LEAP]. [HATRED'S CUT], [PROPEL LEAP]. [PROPEL LEAP], [PROPEL LEAP], [PROPEL LEAP], [PROPEL LEAP], [PROPEL LEAP].

Unsurprisingly, Ranta's breathing became ragged. Using skills that required so much movement so many times in a row would leave anyone exhausted.

"Perhaps it's better if we helped him..." Mary remarked, looking at Haruhiro.

Ranta glared at her with bloodshot eyes. "Don't even think about it! It's *my* rival! *My* prey! *MINE!* I said I'd kill it, so I'll kill it! You guys go take a break—sip some tea or something!"

Why was Ranta so unable to take things seriously? Haruhiro had not the slightest notion, and he had a feeling that he still wouldn't know even after meditating on it for five hundred years.

"Really?" Haruhiro said. "No one brought any tea!"

"It was a figure of speech!" Ranta said. "[HATRED'S CUT]!"

The attack finally grazed the kobold, forcing it back. Ranta dashed after it, shouting ferociously, long sword raised high. He slashed at the kobold wildly, erratically, using his sword more like a hammer than an edged weapon—but the kobold worker was also at the limits of its endurance. It could no longer block all of the incoming attacks. Ranta finished it off with a savage blow to the head.

"DIE!" Ranta cried, thrusting his longsword into the kobold's chest, then twisted it for good measure before pulling it out.

He wiped the sweat off and let out a long sigh, expression full of satisfaction as if it was the end of the day and a job well done. But Haruhiro was disgusted. Disgusted on so many levels. What to do? What was he going to do? But it wasn't like there was anything that could be done at the moment.

"Let's grab the loot and go," Haruhiro said instead.

"That's it? What the hell?!" Ranta protested. "What about 'Good job, Ranta' or 'Awesome work, Ranta' or 'You're amazing and fantastic, Ranta'?!"

"Um. No."

"Idio—"

Haruhiro left Ranta to be as much of an idiot as he wanted while he collected the talismans from the worker kobolds. A worker kobold's ear and nose rings had precious stones embedded within, unlike those of lesser kobolds. These looked much more likely to fetch a price on the market.

Disregarding Ranta's completely unnecessary overexertion, he was encouraged that taking on four low-ranked worker kobolds simultaneously hadn't been very difficult for them. Haruhiro and the others continued onwards, looking for a sink well that would lead to the next stratum.

It took them another half hour to find one and when they did, they immediately ran into three ascending worker kobolds. After the party disposed of them, they were faced with the question of what to do next.

“What’s there to think about? We head down, of course.” The moment Ranta had finished expressing his opinion was the moment that the other five decided on theirs.

“Let’s call it a day and head back,” Haruhiro said, speaking on behalf of everyone else. “This place is new for us and I don’t think it’s a good idea to start thinking we can handle everything that comes our way. Besides, we’ve still got to make our way to the surface. Let’s go back, sort out what we’ve learned about this place, and come again tomorrow.”

Ranta was the only one vehemently against returning to Altana, but Haruhiro didn’t care.

Because the biggest problem now, he thought, is figuring out what we’re going to do with you.

Chapter 5: Container

They returned to Altana before sunset and sold the day's loot at a shop near the marketplace. The talismans, collected from five lesser kobolds and seven low-ranked kobold workers, amounted to just a little over seven silvers.

"This is kinda sad," Yume sighed, expression subdued as she gazed at the seven silvers and the handful of copper coins.

"It's not sad," Ranta said, frowning deeply. "It's fricking pathetic! Seriously, what the hell?!"

"I guess I was expecting a little more too," Mogzo said, forcing a "haha".

"Yeah..." Shihoru hung her head low. "This is less than what we make fighting goblins..."

"Uh..." Haruhiro wanted to say something to cheer everyone up, but he couldn't think of anything positive.

"All we fought were normal kobolds." Mary immediately made up for Haruhiro's lack of words with her cool and calm voice. "We'll be able to make more money once we start fighting elders."

Haruhiro, more than a little flustered, nodded vigorously. "Y-yeah, that's right. And it's not like the fighting was tough. In the beginning things were a little awkward, but later on we were taking down the kobolds easily and no one really got injured, I think. Fighting low level kobolds means we don't get much from them, right?"

"You better be sure," Ranta scoffed. "If tomorrow isn't any better, be prepared to own up to it, Haruhiro!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Haruhiro demanded.

"It means that if you really mean what you say, you'll give me your share of the cut if things don't turn out how you think."

"Why should I do something like that?"

"What? It was your idea to go to the Siren Mines, wasn't it?"

"But you agreed with it, right?"

"It wasn't my idea. All I did was give my approval. The retard that came up with the idea is the most responsible. It's been like that for a gazillion years!"

"Whatever you say," Haruhiro said, giving up.

"Damn straight, it's whatever I say!" Ranta declared.

That much was absolutely true. Haruhiro's inability to argue back to Ranta left him despondent, even though there wasn't any reason to feel that way. Maybe he was just tired—but if so, it was undoubtedly Ranta's fault.

Even while everyone ate dinner together at a stall (which, though cheap, had a good reputation), Ranta spewed stupid words every time he opened his mouth. It was only at times like this—namely, when Haruhiro

was in no mood to talk—that Ranta would just provoke him nonstop. Ranta was just that type of person. Fine then. If he was going to be like that, Haruhiro would just ignore him completely.

“Hey, Haruhiro,” Ranta started.

“...”

“Oy, Haruhiro.”

“...”

“Heeey,” said Ranta, drawing out the word, “Haruhiro.”

“...”

“Hey, hey, hey. Haruhiro.”

“...”

“STUPID IDIOT!”

Still holding onto a half-eaten chicken skewer, Ranta began an odd dance around him. “Hey hey hey! Oy oy oy! Heyyy heyyy, oyyy oyyy! Heeey! Oyyyyyy! Hey hey hey! Oy oy oy!”

Shit. Ranta was kicking up his legs and swinging his hips around madly, but why was it that his upper body stayed in place? It was incredibly gross, but strangely comical at the same time. Haruhiro turned away. He figured everyone one else was trying to avoid looking in Ranta’s direction too, but then... laughter.

It sounded restrained but Haruhiro could definitely hear a soft chuckling. Not just from one person but from several. Suddenly, Yume burst into laughter.

“Whahoo!” Ranta’s glee was apparent. “Hoi hoi hoi!”

Unable to contain herself any longer, Shihoru began laughing too. Ranta began to careen around in earnest. “Hoi hoi hoi! Ho ho ho hoi! Hoi hoi hoi!”

Mogzo was the next to give in, and only Haruhiro and Mary remained. Haruhiro looked her way and saw that, although her gaze was on the floor, her shoulders were trembling. Ranta drew close to her and danced even crazier than before, unleashing the full power of his Hoi Hoi Dance on her in an all out offensive.

Mary! No! But she seemed at the limits of self-control. Her face was basically flat against the stall’s counter now—a posture that told Haruhiro she was holding out on willpower alone.

“Hoi hoi hoiiii! Hoi hoi! Hoi hoi hoiiii! Hoi hoi hoi! Hoi hoi! Hoi hoi hoiiii! Hoi hoi hoi! Hoi hoi!Hoi hoi hoiiii!”

Mary struggled to stifle her laughter.

Hang in there, Mary! Don’t give in; resist! Resist it! How did it come to this? Why did Haruhiro even make this his fight in the first place?

Suddenly, his urge to laugh faded, and then disappeared entirely. Haruhiro swiftly maneuvered himself behind Ranta and jammed his heel into the back of Ranta’s knee. Ranta, cut off mid hoi, spun on Haruhiro as he returned to his spot at the counter.

“What the hell are you doing, retard!” Ranta exclaimed. “I almost had her!”

“Quit spitting at me, it’s gross,” Haruhiro replied calmly.

Ranta responded by purposely spluttering on him.

“Hey! Stop it!”

“*You* stop it, idiot!” He continued spitting.

Ranta’s spit attacks were indiscriminate and turned the scene into an utter disaster as everybody else, and their food, became victims as well. The mood went from amused to angry, Ranta inappropriately delighting in it all. Because of that, everyone was in a foul mood as they returned to the lodge.

“Aaaaaallright!” Ranta declared after they had reached their room. “The girls have the baths first, so it’s all-you-can-peep today!”

How could Ranta think about that at a time like this? Haruhiro could only marvel at his lack of sensitivity. Not wanting to spend any more energy on him, Haruhiro turned over in his bunk so that his back was turned to the overly-excited Ranta.

“Haruhiro, what’s your problem? You coming or what?” Ranta asked. “It’s useless over-thinking what would happen if we’re caught again, so don’t think about it, idiot! Hey, Mogzo! You coming?”

“N-no thanks,” Mogzo replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“What?!” Ranta raged. “C’mon! I can’t use you as a footstool if you don’t come!”

“I’m... not a footstool,” Mogzo replied.

“So become one! You’d be a great footstool!”

“I don’t want to become one...”

“What you want has nothing to do with it! Just do as I say! Trust me! I won’t get you into trouble, okay?!”

“I-I’m staying here.”

For Mogzo, it was a pretty stern refusal. Ranta backed down, if only slightly.

“Fine! I’ll take on this great responsibility myself then. Don’t come crying to me if you regret it later, ’cause I won’t give you any sympathy! Got it?!”

“Okay,” Mogzo said.

“Really?! Is it really okay?! Really really REALLY?!” Ranta persisted.

“I said it’s okay,” Mogzo insisted.

“It’s not okay! Mogzo! If you won’t be my footstool then my entire strategy will fail—no, it’ll be useless! So COME! I don’t care what you say, I’m taking you with me!” Ranta made to drag Mogzo along, but couldn’t move him an inch. “You’re too heavy! C’mon why won’t you budge! Damn it, how much do you weigh, ya fatty?!”

“Yeah, I guess I am pretty fat...” Mogzo admitted.

“You’re not fat,” Haruhiro interjected without thinking. “You’re not fat, Mogzo,” he repeated. “It’s not like your belly’s sticking out or anything. You’ve just got a lot of muscle.”

“Ah, I get it.” Ranta slammed a hand on Haruhiro’s bunk. “Finally decided you wanted in? What am I gonna do with you, huh? Whatever, let’s go. C’mon, hurry and get up!”

How Ranta was able to interpret Haruhiro’s defense of Mogzo like that, Haruhiro hadn’t the slightest idea. Wasn’t there anyone who could dispose of Ranta for him, sooner rather than later? And Haruhiro wasn’t joking about that.

After they had finished their turn bathing, the boys returned to the room. Haruhiro put out the lights, made his way over to his bunk and in the pitch darkness, stayed awake to think.

The essence of it came down to this: should they keep Ranta in the party or kick him out?

As far as Haruhiro was concerned, he admitted there were times he never wanted to see Ranta’s face again. It would be an enormous relief if Ranta just went away and never came back. But it wasn’t just Haruhiro. He wasn’t sure about Mogzo and Mary, but Ranta was always spitting vitriol at Yume and Shihoru. They weren’t the type to speak ill of people to others, but even so it was clear that they hated him. Ranta was just that insufferable.

Haruhiro couldn’t make a decision based on emotions alone, though. He had to consider practical factors too; in other words, Ranta’s fighting ability. If they kicked Ranta from the party, how would it affect their team during a fight?

Is thinking about these things what it means to be a leader? he wondered.

Currently, Ranta functioned as their second tank, behind Mogzo. He was reasonably well armored, equipped with chainmail under leather and a bucket helm. But the Dread Knight fighting style wasn’t based on close combat. It was an idiosyncratic mid-range style where fighters darted in and out of striking range, doing everything they could to avoid short, blade-locking distances. Rather than involving straightforward attacks, their techniques made their fights into cat-and-mouse games.

Strictly speaking, Dread Knights were actually supposed to be attackers, not tanks. And considering Ranta’s personality, perhaps a Dread Knight’s style suited him better than the Warrior class.

Asking Yume to tank in her light armor was impossible, and Haruhiro wasn’t suited for it either. Mary and Shihoru were out of the question as Priest and Mage, respectively. That left only Ranta. If they kicked Ranta out, they would lose their second tank and not having anyone to replace him hurt their fighting ability.

Their fighting ability would be diminished if they kicked Ranta without having anybody to take his place as their second tank.

If so, then it was simply a matter of finding someone to replace him. Unlike healers, fighters were plentiful. Haruhiro had a feeling they wouldn’t have a hard time finding a replacement. If they asked the well-connected Kikkawa, he could probably help find someone who would fit in. After all, that was how they recruited Mary. Granted, working with her had been rough in the beginning, but they were slowly getting better at understanding each other.

The overbearingly extroverted Kikkawa made good friends with everyone and he might have been a better judge of personality than most gave him credit for. Haruhiro wanted to think that there were was a slew of available Warriors who were better than Ranta. Perhaps. Maybe. It was definitely an option worth considering.

Mogzo was snoring loudly, already fast asleep. Ranta was usually the first to do so, but no matter how much Haruhiro strained his ears, he couldn’t hear the peculiar way of breathing that characterized Ranta’s slumber.

“Ranta,” Haruhiro called tentatively, to which Ranta replied, “Yeah?”

“Um...” Haruhiro hesitated.

“What do you want?” Ranta asked impatiently.

“I want to talk to you about something.”

“What?”

“Not here. I don’t want to wake Mogzo. How about going outside?”

“Fine.”

As they exited the lodge, Haruhiro wondered why he was doing something like this. Did he have something he wanted to talk to Ranta about? He sure didn’t want to speak with the guy but for some reason felt a sort of obligation.

Whatever the decision was, one thing was certain: it would be horrible to plot and contrive behind Ranta’s back now, only to tell him later, without warning, that his job was done and that the party no longer needed him. Haruhiro didn’t feel like Ranta deserved something like that, no matter how badly he thought of him. Or maybe Haruhiro just didn’t want himself to be a backstabbing coward.

No, forget maybe. Of course he didn’t want to become one. That was just too... But why? Why did he have to plot and scheme and, all joking aside, bloody his hands just to get rid of Ranta?

“Ranta...”

Haruhiro crouched against the side of the building, leaning back against the wall. Ranta followed suit.

“Yeah?”

“Um... what do you think? About our party,” asked Haruhiro.

“It’s a party,” Ranta replied evenly. “All there is to it.”

“What do you mean by that? That it’s ‘all there is to it’?”

“Look, do you have a problem with me? I think you know I’ve always done my part.”

“How so?”

“Can you say I haven’t? I dealt with one kobold myself today, didn’t I? That’s proof right there.”

“If everyone had surrounded it we would have finished it in a fraction of the time it took you alone,” Haruhiro pointed out.

“Can you pull that off all the time?” Ranta countered. “Hell no. If I can keep one enemy completely occupied in a fight you can do your... what’s it called? Flexibility to a certain extent? Battle tactics? Whatever, some fancy shit.”

So despite Ranta being Ranta, he did put thought into things when they were fighting. But that didn’t change anything.

Haruhiro pressed a palm into his face. “How am I supposed to know what you’re thinking in the middle of a fight if you don’t tell me?”

“You’re telling me you want me to explain every intention behind every action then ask for your opinion before I do it?”

“I never said anything like that. But there’s stuff that doesn’t get conveyed if you don’t say it, so that’s why I’m talking to you now. You’re already easy to misunderstand and this just makes it worse.”

“You don’t really think it’s some kinda misunderstanding, do you?” Ranta picked up a nearby pebble then tossed it away. “You guys just judge and make assumptions about what I’m thinking based on your impressions of me.”

“Even if that were true, we formed our impressions of you based on what you do and what you say.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault.”

“If not you then who? Mine? Yume’s? Shihoru’s? Mogzo’s? Mary’s?” Haruhiro felt his temper rising. *Need to stay calm. Need to keep a cool head.* He didn’t want to turn this into a fight. He sighed and said, “We work as a team. There needs to be a certain level of... cooperation between everyone.”

“So what? Are you saying I’m uncooperative?” Ranta challenged.

“Are you saying you are cooperative?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re uncooperative.”

“Look Haruhiro, everyone has things they’re good and bad at. So I have my faults, but what about you guys? Everyone except me’s perfect? I’m a goddamn sinner and you guys are saints, huh.”

“...I never said that.”

“So. Name my faults. You think I’m selfish?”

“Yes. And annoying.”

“Fuck you.”

“And a foul mouth too. And you’re pretty quick to blame everyone else.”

“What!? How is every single thing my fault? Collective responsibility, dumbass! *Collective responsibility*. That’s why it’s called a ‘team’.”

“That’s something a six-year old would say. It’s not even a logical argument.”

“What’s NOT logical about it? It’s brilliantly logical. Insanely logical,” Ranta argued.

“I’m not going off on another tangent with you.”

“Fine. What about you then, Mr. I’m-Perfect-All-the-Time Haruhiro? Why don’t I shut up then and we talk about *your* faults.”

“Me?” Haruhiro’s mouth clamped shut. Faults. Shortcomings. What were his? It wasn’t as if he didn’t have any; he had so many it was like all his good points were buried under a mountain of them. *But,*” Why do I have to list them for you?”

“Oh. I get it now. It’s bitch bitch bitch about Ranta all the time and when it comes to *you*, you ain’t got shit to say. I soooo get it.”

“Get what? What are you talking about?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about! It’s easy for you guys to blame all OUR problems on me, so you do it all the time. And what? Does that make you feel better? More like a *real* team? Is that your idea of building solidarity?”

“Wait, we—”

“You’re saying it’s NOT true? Fucking liar.”

“...It’s not like we get together to conspire behind your back and blame you for everything,” Haruhiro said.

“Why? Why would you? No one needs to say shit ’cause everyone’s already in on it. You guys already decided that I’m your scapegoat.”

“You’re beyond paranoid.”

“Is that what you *really think*?” Ranta’s tone dripped with sarcasm. “Fine. Whatever. Thanks to me, you guys can just keep ignoring your own faults. But let me ask you: Have I ever, EVER, said a single damn thing about everyone treating me like a scapegoat? I’m only saying it now because you brought it up first, Haruhiro. If you didn’t drag me out here, I wasn’t gonna whine about it. I don’t give a shit about baby games like getting along with the other kids in the class. If you want to hate me, hate me all you want, I’ll play the bad guy or whatever. Sure. It’s fine. But we’re a ‘team’ and I’ll do my part. Because that’s what you call ‘teamwork’.”

Haruhiro opened his mouth to reply, but couldn’t find any words. He brought Ranta out here with the intention of asking him to leave their party. His reasoning had convinced him it was in the team’s best interests. Honestly, he wasn’t confident in his ability to kick Ranta out straight away but he at least wanted to lay down the terms. Give Ranta a chance to improve his behavior and let him know they could no longer be part of the same team if he didn’t.

That had been the plan, anyway.

Maybe his reasoning was too one-sided. Were he and the others really using Ranta as a scapegoat? He had a hard time believing it. Ranta also shared responsibility in why everyone always faulted him. He could only blame himself for everyone emphasizing his shortcomings.

—*We’re not in the wrong here. Ranta’s the one who’s completely, totally, utterly wrong.*

If that was true, then it was better to get rid of Ranta now rather than later after all. Personally, it would be like a weight off Haruhiro’s shoulders. He could explain it to everyone afterwards and they would understand, right? The problem was he couldn’t say with unwavering certainty that he wouldn’t regret it later.

And if there were any regrets to be had, they would impact Haruhiro hardest of all. He was the one who weighed the factors, he was the one who made the judgment call, and he would be the one to kick Ranta out. In the end, the burden of responsibility was heaviest on himself.

Why? Why am I the one who has to deal with everything?

“I’m going back to sleep,” Ranta declared, getting to his feet and returning to their room.

Haruhiro remained where he was, unmoving. His insides felt heavy and his stomach hurt.

I don't want to do this anymore, he thought to himself. I don't want to think about it anymore. Enough's enough. I'm not suited to be a leader. I can't do it. I can't take the responsibility. Manato... help me...

He knew full well Manato was gone, but he couldn't help it. There was no one else he could ask.

“Is leadership really this lonely...?”

It just wasn't in him to be a leader. It was like trying to fill a container riddled with holes.



Chapter 6: Taking the Long Way Around

Human beings, though, were mysterious creatures.

After waking up refreshed from a good night's sleep, it was like all the annoyance, doubt, and despair from the night before never existed. Ranta seemed completely normal too, unchanged from his usual self.

Everyone already knew they planned to return to the Siren Mines today, and that decided, they were also acutely aware of the need to increase their earnings. They entered the mountain, easily cleaning up any first-stratum lesser and worker kobolds they ran into, and proceeded to descend to the second stratum.

They had gotten this far yesterday, so today's goal was to reach the third stratum. Haruhiro wasn't convinced that everyone was completely used to fighting kobolds yet, but it was obvious they were predicting and following the enemy's movements better than yesterday.

Easy. We got this, no problem, Haruhiro thought. But optimists were often in for a rude awakening.

The sink well down to the next stratum appeared in the distance. Next to it was...

"Is that a kobold?" Haruhiro wondered out loud.

With what appeared to be an enemy in sight, everyone waited while Haruhiro scouted ahead alone. When he got up close, he couldn't believe his eyes. It was huge. Was that an elder kobold? Normal kobolds were just under five feet, and he had heard that elder kobolds were about a half foot taller.

Only five and a half feet tall? No more?

The especially large kobold had three underlings with it. The underlings were equipped defensively: plate armor, helms, round shields and swords. They looked larger than any of the regular kobolds Haruhiro had seen before, but even so, the large kobold was one or two sizes larger than them at about 6'5". It wasn't just its unusual height though...

"Black and white..." Haruhiro whispered out loud.

It had black fur with patches of white mixed in. Patches... Haruhiro's pulse quickened. *Shit!* It didn't seem to have noticed him yet, but if it did... *Not funny...* This was some joke, but it wasn't funny at all. *Shit shit shit...* Its sword. *What the hell?!* Its sword was probably around four feet long with an incredibly broad blade... it looked like a man-sized carving knife.

That thing could probably split a person in two with a single swing. The sword must be enormously heavy, but the kobold carried it like it was feather light. It must be monstrously strong. Mary's previous party fought that thing?

That's just insane, Haruhiro couldn't help thinking. *We'll die. We'll all die for sure.*

The strongest enemies they'd ever fought were the plate-armored goblin and the hobgoblin, but this was on a totally different level. It wasn't even in the same league. *Shit.* It was strong. Crazy insane strong.

Haruhiro returned to the others. Even though he couldn't see his own face, he knew it must be as white as a sheet.

"It's Deathpatch. He's here," Haruhiro reported.

Shihoru gasped and Mogzo exhaled sharply. Perhaps Mary had already been expecting something like this, since she merely furrowed her brows and gave a slight nod.

“Deathbatch...” Yume whispered.

“Deathpatch,” Haruhiro corrected automatically, the familiarity of the routine calming him a little. He looked over at Ranta.

“Let’s go! No choice but to take him on,” Ranta laughed softly. Maybe he was trying to be a badass with that grin on his face, but all he was accomplishing was idiot.

Well, Haruhiro expected this from him by now.

“Okay Ranta,” Haruhiro replied. “You go ahead. We’ll wait here. Good luck!”

“So that’s how you’re gonna be, huh?” said Ranta. “Fucking coward.”

“Sure,” Haruhiro agreed pleasantly. “So. You going or not? What’ll it be? Hurry up and decide.”

“Looks like there’s no other option—” Ranta brushed his thumb across the edge of his chin “—but to put it off ’till later. Lucky for Deathpatch, he gets to live a few days longer...”

“Yes yes, very lucky for him.”

“Go tell him, Haruhiro. He just barely managed to escape death at my hands,” Ranta commanded.

“Go tell him yourself. I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

No one but Haruhiro made to involve themselves in Ranta’s antics. Even Yume, who was always quick to rebuke him, remained silent throughout the exchange. Perhaps that just went to show just how tired she was of him. Haruhiro realized then: being the only one humoring Ranta while everyone else stayed out of it must have made them seem like best friends. The thought thoroughly disgusted him.

There were five sink wells that connected the second and third strata, so it didn’t take long to find another. There was no sign of any presence, kobold or otherwise, in the vicinity of the sink well, and nothing seemed to be at the bottom when they peered into it. Their view from the top was fairly limited, though.

“I’ll go down first,” Haruhiro said. “If it’s all clear, I’ll let you guys know and you can follow.”

“What if you run into trouble?” Yume asked, blinking.

“Um, I’ll yell, so come save me.”

Yume smiled broadly. “Got it.”

Feeling his spirits lifted a little, Haruhiro returned the smile and said, “Here I go.”

The rope ladders hanging off the lip of the sink well looked worn and well used, but they still held Haruhiro’s weight when he began his descent. Being a Thief, keeping his balance on the way down was simple and he reached the bottom quickly. When he turned around though, the kobolds were waiting for him.

“Er... good afternoon,” he greeted meekly. The kobolds growled at him. “No time for pleasantries, huh?”

Haruhiro jumped out of the way as one of the kobolds sprang at him. It was big—not as big as Deathpatch, but still large. An elder? *So this is an elder...* It was equipped with chainmail and a single-edged sword. Two underlings accompanied it, armed in a similar manner.

“Guys! Down! Enemy! Bad! Hurry! Help!” All Haruhiro managed were single word phrases.

Haruhiro circled around the elder kobold and its underlings, trying to put distance between himself and them. However, he couldn't run too far from the sink well either... not until everyone else had come. He was limited to this general area, but with three of them... If it had been just one, he might have somehow managed to keep it running in circles, but with three it was proving nearly impossible.

When he tried to run straight, in front of him was a kobold. When he turned back around, kobold. To his side, kobold. Kobold, kobold, kobold. It was a goddamn kobold-palooza.

Haruhiro dodged an incoming attack from the elder, grunting as the kobold's sword nicked his cheek. He hardly felt the pain, but getting cut caused him to panic anyway. He lost track of the enemy and had no idea if his companions were coming at all. Panicked and helpless, he simply ran the other way whenever a kobold appeared in his field of vision.

Staying in the area below the sink well was not going to happen. He didn't have the luxury; no way there would have been such luxury.

He heard Ranta's shout and wondered if he'd ever thought of Ranta as this dependable before now. Nope. Never. Not even once. Ranta scrambled down the rope ladder first and immediately engaged the elder kobold, even though it would have been better for him to help Haruhiro first.

But Ranta never thought before acting. He simply went for the closest and biggest enemy that came into sight, his actions lacking the motivation of a need to protect his friends or help a teammate in trouble. But because he never thought too deeply about anything, he did have a sort of ability to attack instantly and without hesitation. Maybe it was something like good and bad rolled into one.

Haruhiro heard Mogzo's battle cry and then Yume shouting, “Haru!”

“Oom rel eckt vel dash!” Shihoru had come too.

“Haru!” Mary's voice.

Everyone was down the ladder and with him now. Gradually, he felt calm fill him again. Ranta had engaged the elder kobold first but at some point had switched with Mogzo. Now, he and Yume took on one each, Kobold A and Kobold B, respectively.

“Haru, what about your wound?!” asked Mary.

Haruhiro gingerly touched his cheek, and, although it stung with pain, it would be fine as long as he left it alone.

“I'm fine! Heal me afterwards!” he replied on his way to support Yume. He maneuvered around Kobold B, aiming for its back while assessing the situation around him.

I don't have the ability or the qualifications, but for the moment, I'm the leader.

All things considered, Ranta was doing fairly well. He employed [PROPEL LEAP] and [JUKE STAB] to stay out of the enemy's range while waiting for his chance to attack, and then struck with [HATRED'S CUT] or [ANGER THRUST]. As usual, Haruhiro thought all that moving around was both unnecessary and inefficient, but maybe that was more just a Dread Knight's fighting style than Ranta specifically. Still, it was the fact that this particular Dread Knight was Ranta which irritated him.

Mogzo and his opponent looked evenly matched. He hadn't managed to land any heavy blows on the elder kobold, and once in a while the elder would land a blow or two on him. *Wait, no, that's not quite right...* Mogzo was *allowing* the elder kobold through his guard.

He was wearing plate mail so a graze here or there would just put scratches on the armor, not actually hurt him. Mogzo was blocking heavy blows with his bastard sword while letting the plate mail absorb everything else.

“The hobgoblin was stronger!” cried Mogzo, suddenly stepping in aggressively and locking blades with his opponent. He immediately followed up by wrapping his bastard sword around the kobold’s sword, then pulling his own sword back. With a shout, he unleashed [SPIRAL SLASH] straight at its face.

Mogzo’s attack grazed the kobold’s cheek the same way Haruhiro’s had been grazed, causing it to jump back in panic. Mogzo pursued, closing the distance once more. Watching Mogzo sent chills down Haruhiro’s spine. The aura of stability Mogzo provided in a fight was amazing... but was that due in part to Ranta’s ability to keep one enemy fully occupied?

Indeed, Ranta looked less harried now than he had been in yesterday’s fights. Was that thanks to experience? Ranta had preposterously insisted on fighting that last kobold alone yesterday. Maybe because he had forced himself to go a bit over his head, he figured out the best way to deal with the kobolds for himself.

We won’t know unless we try... Is that what it was?

Facing everything with caution, not reaching for anything beyond their grasp, and having this safety first mentality meant advancement was impossible. Even if they did advance, the pace would be terribly slow. Without anybody to dispute Haruhiro’s leadership, it would be only a painstaking improvement.

Do we need Ranta around after all? Haruhiro wasn’t convinced and maybe he didn’t want to be convinced. But Manato acknowledged Ranta’s necessity, even if he didn’t really like Ranta as a person. So a decision had to be based on more than just personal likes and dislikes? But Ranta never butted heads with Manato the way he did with Haruhiro. When Manato was killed, Ranta, in his own way, had been just as upset as everyone else.

What’s the difference between Manato and me? wondered Haruhiro.

Naturally, there were plenty of differences. In fighting ability and wits, Manato clearly had him beat. But Manato had established a sort of peace with Ranta, while Haruhiro just couldn’t get along with him. What was the difference? Perhaps it was fine just to blame it on ability and wits and leave it at that.

The **line** appeared, completely unexpected and unintended. That indistinct line of light, glowing hazy and faint, connecting the point of Haruhiro’s dagger to a point on the kobold’s back. It wasn’t straight nor just a simple curve, but more like a winding trail.

Haruhiro knew what to do: Follow the path it provided. He wished that he could see the **line** every time, but that was just wishful thinking. It appeared less than one in a hundred times, if even that many.

When Haruhiro engaged an enemy, the first thing he did was get in position behind it. Then it was maneuvering to remain at its back while checking every second—or even more frequently—for an opportunity to strike. He had repeated the process more than a thousand times now because he didn’t know of any other way.

He couldn’t fight an enemy face-to-face. Those first fights with the pit rats and mud goblin had instilled deep into him that he didn’t have what it took to win against any enemy fair and square, pound for pound. So even though it was sneaky and underhanded, he attacked from behind where the enemy was least protected.

He admitted he was a little pathetic for using such methods but he didn’t consider it *that* horrible. Fights were to the death and both sides battled with all earnestness and desperation. Nothing else more desperate, nothing more solemn; because it wasn’t easy nor simple, no method was forbidden...

Or so Manato had once said.

When Haruhiro saw the **line**, he kept his breathing calm. When it became ragged and unsteady, the **line** that finally appeared for him would disappear. It would disappear if he tried to bend his knees to crouch, or if he tensed his wrists, elbows, or shoulders. He didn't even have time to think about letting this chance get away. He had to move immediately—no, that wasn't quite the right way to put it...

When the **line** appeared, Haruhiro felt as if his body reacted without him thinking. It would be impossible to land his attack if it didn't work that way.

It landed this time as well. Haruhiro's body followed, smooth as butter, and his dagger slid into the kobold's back without resistance. Perhaps it was inaccurate to say that Haruhiro consciously followed the path the **line** provided, since he was already en route by the time he noticed.

The kobold made a gurgling noise, then fell to the ground as its final breath left its body.

"Wh—?!" Yume blinked repeatedly, awestruck.

"Yume, onto the next one!" Haruhiro exclaimed.

Yume nodded several times. "Sorry! Yume was just surprised, that's all!"

"Oom rel eckt vel dash!" Shihoru chanted, casting [SHADOW ECHO]. *Voash!* The black seaweed-like shadow elemental flew at the elder kobold. It noticed and tried to dodge, but not quickly enough. The spell grazed its right shoulder, and, while the chainmail armor prevented the spell from injuring it, [SHADOW ECHO] didn't work like fire or electricity. It caused convulsions rather than doing damage.

The elder kobold's right shoulder began to shake, preventing it from moving for a fraction of a second.

"THANK YOU!" came Mogzo's [RAGE CLEAVE]. The elder kobold blocked with its sword, but its stance was broken. Mogzo pressed down with his bastard sword, forcing the elder kobold's weapon to the side, then reversed his swing and rammed his blade into the side of the elder's head.

The elder kobold made to return the attack, but before it could move Mogzo kicked it onto its behind and then brought his sword straight down, crushing its skull.

"YES!" Haruhiro pumped his fist.

One more worker kobold to go. Ranta was still trying to use [PROPEL LEAP] to retreat and try to draw the kobold back with him, but as expected, the kobold was having none of it. It refused to step forward so Ranta leapt in again, throwing [HATRED'S CUT] at it. Again, the kobold read him like an open book and deftly dodged to the right.

With Ranta effectively sidestepped, the kobold took advantage of its perfect positioning for a counterattack. It swung at Ranta, forcing him to throw himself to the ground with a grunt. The kobold's attack just barely missed.

"Ranta!" Haruhiro began to run over to help.

"Stay away!" Ranta yelled, up on one knee while deflecting the kobold's attacks. "I can still do this! I'll kill this one on my own! I'll fucking kill it dead and get my Vice!"

"What happened to being flexible?!" Haruhiro countered.

"Two birds, one stone! [PROPEL LEAP]!" Ranta leapt backwards, still down on one knee. "Whoa! It's a new [PROPEL LEAP]! I just fucking made my own original skill!!!"

"It didn't look all that different from the old skill..." Yume said coldly.

“Yeah,” Shihoru agreed.

“True.” And Mary as well.

Mogzo forced a dry-sounding laugh.

“Filthy maggoty bastard scum!” Ranta cursed the kobold over and over as he attacked frantically.

Just let him at it, Haruhiro decided. Or at least until he looks like he’s about to get killed.

Chapter 7: Leave it to the Master

An elder kobold's talisman fetched quite the price. Whether it was an earring, nose stud, or on occasion a necklace, any was guaranteed to sell for over five silvers due to the precious stones embedded within. There were even cases where one stone alone sold for over forty silvers.

While in the second stratum were low-ranked kobold workers' dwellings, the third stratum housed the higher ranked kobold workers. The elder taskmasters of these workers were called the "foremen". The foremen were similar in physique to the worker kobolds they led on the second or third strata, but, unlike the workers, they were properly outfitted in combat gear.

Those foremen and their subordinate kobolds were the main target of Haruhiro's group. The difficulty of the fight depended entirely on the competence of the foreman. It wasn't just the foreman's martial prowess, but its ability to command its subordinates as well. Counterintuitively, fights where the foreman preferred to stand at the front and fight all by themselves were comparatively easy to win. On the other hand, when they encountered a foreman who stayed back to issue orders, it made for a tough battle.

Humans were the same. In general, humans tended to focus entirely on the enemy standing before them first, and it wasn't hard to understand why. Going after a different enemy while ignoring the one right in front of you was a sure way to get yourself killed. Nobody was that silly, of course, so pragmatically speaking, the first priority in a fight was eliminating the immediate threat.

But, sometimes priorities change. For example, when a companion is in trouble, you might risk leaving yourself open to attack in order to help them.

Then there were times when it was a command, not a choice.

Haruhiro would never force anyone to put themselves at such risk, but kobold foremen were different. They would howl and signal at subordinates to ignore Mogzo or Ranta and attack Mary or Shihoru instead. And whether it was out of bravery, submissiveness, or timidity before the alpha-male, the subordinates would obey without concern for the preservation of their own lives.

If they were actually able to get past Mogzo and Ranta, that would land the team in big trouble. Shihoru's mage class in particular had no close combat ability and needed everyone to protect her. Their battle formation would collapse and the fight would become a disaster.

On the other hand, if they could take the foreman out of the fight, the subordinates hardly posed a threat. The way Haruhiro saw it, all they had to do was come up with a strategy to take out the foreman as fast as possible to render the rest of the kobolds helpless.

Currently, there was always one foreman and two or three subordinates in every fight. With this predictable enemy group composition, they held an advantage, and they had also become skilled at hunting them. At this rate, descending to the fourth or fifth strata didn't seem like a bad idea, and when the next ladder rung came into view so naturally, everyone's motivation went up.

They had been working on the third stratum for ten days and had saved up some money so it was decided that they would return to their guilds to acquire new skills. Everyone was eager to broaden their combat abilities and being able to do more in fights would give them a sense of achievement.

Haruhiro returned to Master Barbara and the Thieves Guild and paid four silvers to learn the Thief technique, [WIDOW MAKER].

"Shall we get started then, Old Cat?" Master Barbara smirked.

The training area was a room within the Nishimachi Thieves Guild Compound called the “Killing Venom Room”. It was a scary and foreboding name, but most of the rooms in the compound were named in a similar manner. The Killing Venom Room itself was quite spacious, but contained not a single window. A chandelier filled with candles which could be raised and lowered hung from the ceiling and provided some light, but even a generous person couldn’t call the room well-lit.

If not for the candles, the room would be pitch black even during the day. The entire atmosphere made Haruhiro slightly uncomfortable.

Master Barbara was in her usual revealing clothing, except today, the lower half of her face was covered by a black scarf. Long hair concealed even more of her face, including one eye, making her appearance quite terrifying.

“Er... yes, ma’am,” Haruhiro replied politely.

“You’ve really toughened up, haven’t you? Or have you been working just on hardening yourself down there?”

“No, ma’am. I haven’t been particularly trying to—”

Haruhiro could not finish his sentence, because Master Barbara had suddenly moved behind him. Before he could even begin to turn, Master Barbara had him in a full nelson hold... or something. She had both his arms firmly locked, but she also had her right leg snaked around one of his legs, rendering him completely immobile. And her knife was right against his jugular.

“[WIDOW MAKER] is a technique where you instantly seize your target from behind, like so, and then mortally wound them. If I wished, your throat would already be slit. If you don’t have a knife, you might just break their neck. And when you want to disable, rather than kill...” Master Barbara moved the tip of her knife from his neck to down to his crotch. “You may stab them here. It’s particularly effective on males.”

“Uhh... right,” Haruhiro said. “Yes, ma’am. Er... would it be possible... to let go of me now? ‘Cause, you know...”

“Hmm? Oh, yes... You’ve never been intimate with a woman before, have you? Not used to being held like this?” Master Barbara chuckled softly.

“Errr...” Haruhiro tried to bend away, but Master Barbara held him down firmly. “Wah! W-would you please q-quit it with the ear?!”

“What’s wrong? I’m just breathing normally,” she replied.

“I-it’s just... that’s, er, my weak spot...”

“I see. In that case...”

“Huh?” Haruhiro had no idea what happened next. He was suddenly somersaulting through the air before landing hard on his back, knocking the wind out of his lungs. Master Barbara peered down at him from above.

“If you can combine [WIDOW MAKER] with other techniques, there are plenty of ways you can manipulate your opponents,” she continued. “But first, I’ll have you be intimately familiar with the technique’s effects on yourself... and we’ll keep at it until you hack up blood.”

“...Um, and I won’t die? Ma’am.”

“No point in worrying about it, is there? You won’t even realize that you’re dead. But rest assured, I’ll make sure you’re cremated, and then the Curse of the Deathless King won’t zombify you.”

What was he going to do if he died? None of the others knew it, but even since their first meeting Master Barbara had been like this. Though, to her credit, she always stopped short of actually killing him and Haruhiro had gotten fairly proficient at using the fighting techniques she taught him. Maybe he just had to trust it and leave his training to her. Maybe. Perhaps. Was it seriously okay, though? Really?

For the next three hours, Master Barbara used [WIDOW MAKER] in all its variations on Haruhiro, up until he collapsed and couldn’t get back up.

“What’s the matter? Now’s not the time to be lazy, Old Cat.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“If you can’t stand, then I suppose we’ll have a break,” Master Barbara said and promptly sat herself on Haruhiro’s stomach. Haruhiro made a half-gurgling, half-choking noise. “Bear with it. Your training doesn’t stop when you’re resting. Toughen up those abdominal muscles. And maybe we can even do something for those groin muscles, hmm?”

“I’ll die, I’ll die for sure...”

“But this is tolerable, isn’t it? Not *that* many people have died from my training, you see.”

“People have actually died?”

“I’m joking. Why would I want to kill a precious source of monetary income? Now, level up.”

“Urghhhh...” Haruhiro groaned as she pulled in a leg, increasing the weight on him. He was already putting a lot of strength into keeping his stomach muscles tight. If he wasn’t, there was no way he could have borne the weight.

“And double that,” she said as she lifted up her remaining leg.

The entirety of her body weight was now on Haruhiro’s stomach. This was supposed to be a break? If this was her idea of a joke, it wasn’t funny.

“Let’s chat for a bit,” Master Barbara proposed pleasantly.

“C-can’t,” Haruhiro wheezed.

“Stupid boy. Don’t talk back.”

She was demanding the impossible. As usual. And if Haruhiro didn’t obey, the consequences would be even worse.

“U-uhh... talk... about what, ma’am?” he acquiesced.

“You could tell me a story.”

“I don’t... r-really have any, ma’am. S-stories.”

“How boring. See, that’s why you’ll never be able to bed yourself a girl.”

“I-I suppose... so.”

“You have girls in your party, right? How many?”

“T-three,” Haruhiro gasped.

“You need to at least claim one. Of course, claiming all three would make you quite the alpha-male.”

“N-no, ma’am... that’s t-too...”

“That kind of drama between party members is too much of a hassle?” Master Barbara ventured.

“I-I... don’t know, ma’am. I don’t... h-have any experience with that...”

“Even if it’s a little bothersome, a bit of it is quite necessary. It makes me recall when I was like you are now... Going at it in secret with the party leader, while toying with our male mage at the same time, and while playing around with the leader from another party. Well, our party fell apart shortly after that and other things happened...”

“...M-Master Barbara... when you say ‘fell apart’... y-you mean you’re the one who broke it apart, r-right?”

“Ah, the springtime of youth. Don’t you feel it too?”

“It... s-sounds more like... crazy blind passion, ma’am,” Haruhiro said.

“Don’t say things like that,” Master Barbara chastised.

Haruhiro gasped, unable to take it anymore when she lifted up both her legs and wiggled her butt deeper into his midsection. But if he tried to twist around to throw her off, he didn’t know what she would do to him, so he had no choice but to remain motionless and take it. He had to admit, though, Master Barbara’s sense of balance was amazing.

“There’s no time but *now*,” she continued. “You’re what? Sixteen? And surrounding your sixteen-year-old self are girls and boys. It’s sink or swim. Once the time has passed, you’ll never be able to get it back. Never. If you don’t make your move now, the girl you like might get stolen by someone else. Basically, other boys are going to want to do the girl you want to do too, and then she’ll be gone. And when you realize that because you catch them making out in public, it’ll be too late.”

“B-but, ma’am... there’s no girl that I like,” Haruhiro replied.

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Huh?”

“Old Cat. You seem to have a tendency to always play it safe. You’re just holding back because you don’t want to cause any friction between your party members, aren’t you?”

“T-that’s... uhh...”

“In my experience, boys fall in love with girls who are close by. Boys are built that way by nature—to fall in love with the girls around them.”

The girls around him. Yume, Shihoru, and Mary. He didn’t hate any of them. He sometimes thought that Yume’s air-headedness made her pretty cute, and they had hugged each other once. It had been under some fairly unique circumstances, sure, but the way it felt still lingered. Or rather, he hadn’t forgotten. But if asked whether he had “feelings” for her, he didn’t think he did. Probably.

Shihoru... well, her boobs were really big. *What. Why is that the first thing that comes to my mind about her?* Was he some sort of barbarian? A primitive caveman? He was the worst. The absolute worst. And there was also *that*...

Shihoru had liked Manato. Or so it seemed. No, forget “seemed”. There was really no doubt about it. There was no way he could... no, just no. Out of the question.



Mary, then? Mary was... Stylish and beautiful. Haruhiro, a completely average person, didn't have a chance in hell of getting close to somebody like her. She was his teammate, so there had to be some degree of closeness, but Haruhiro didn't really think there was anything else between them.

Not too long ago, during a conversation about their types, Mary had said that her type was Mogzo. Did that mean she wasn't just superficially into good looking men? But if it was Mogzo, then Haruhiro had zero chance, didn't he? Not a snowball's chance in hell. But it wasn't like he had those feelings for Mary anyway. Probably.

He just... wished he could make her smile more.

It would touch him deeply if he could see someone as lovely as her smile for real. That would be more than wonderful. But he wasn't interested in her in a romantic sort of way, he didn't think.

"Err... Master Barbara?"

"Yes, Old Cat?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course it's about girls, yes?"

"Not really..."

"Pathetic boy. Trying to change the subject now, are we?"

"No, ma'am. I wouldn't dare. I wouldn't even think about it. That's not it. Really."

Haruhiro told her about the **line** that appeared now and then during fights. The lower half of Master Barbara's face was concealed by a scarf so her expression was difficult to read, but Haruhiro had the feeling that she was listening intently. She also placed her feet back on the floor as he talked, taking her weight off him.

"I see," she said at length. "That's not a bad sign."

"Sign?"

"But don't be mistaken. It's not anything special."

"Mistaken? I don't even know anything about it..."

"Slow, aren't you? An old cat in every sense."

"Slow? I don't think I'm slow, ma'am..."

"No, you *are* slow. But. For someone so dull-witted, your instincts aren't bad. The **line** that you see—feel, perhaps is a better way to describe it—appears once or twice to anyone who's accumulated enough experience."

"But it's not just once or twice, ma'am. I can't say that I see it all the time, not even once a day, but..."

"Yes, that might be the case. The difference is rather large depending on the person."

"What about you, Master Barbara?"

She shrugged. “Sometimes it appears, sometimes it doesn’t. It’s not like we can will it to appear by concentrating hard or anything.”

“But when you do see it, are you able to execute [BACKSTAB] perfectly too?”

“It’s not something you can rely on though, no?”

“...Of course. It’s too erratic. Almost like it’s completely random.”

“Exactly. Work on perfecting your fighting techniques. And build up those muscles.”

Haruhiro gasped once more as Master Barbara lifted up her legs again. He couldn’t see her expression, but she was probably grinning like a madwoman under that scarf.

“You still have a ways to go. You have to build the stamina and strength to last going once or twice with a girl after killing five, six orcs. Because you’re not really an old cat.”

“I-I’m fine with being an old cat, ma’am...”

“Don’t be cheeky, brat!”

“ARGH...”

Master Barbara had hit him in the groin, almost making him pass out.

“Whoops. Put a little too much oomph in that just now...”

If he kept training here, Haruhiro had a feeling that sooner or later, he would be rendered sterile.

Chapter 8: Grasping Beyond Reach

After safely—or perhaps not so safely—acquiring the [WIDOW MAKER] technique, Haruhiro and the others resumed their daily routine in the Siren Mines.

Ranta had learned a Dread Knight spell called [DARK TERROR] which instilled the fear of the Black God Skulheill into an opponent and robbed them of rational judgment. Depending on how it was employed, it seemed like a useful technique... if Ranta was competent enough to use it right.

Mogzo returned with the dual techniques [FORWARD THRUST] and [REVERSE THRUST]. [FORWARD THRUST] was a one-handed thrust with fairly long reach while [REVERSE THRUST] was a thrust used while retreating. These were like less fancy versions of Ranta's bait and confuse skills, [PROPEL LEAP] and [JUKE STAB].

Shihoru learned the [SHADOW BIND] spell. A shadow elemental was placed on the ground, which would immobilize any enemy who stepped on it. It had drawbacks however; only one elemental could be placed at a time, strong enemies could force their way out of the bind, and it only lasted for up to twenty-five seconds. But like [PHANTOM SLEEP], any battle skill the opponent might have was irrelevant to its effects. It was more of a support spell than an attack skill, but it was a spell that matched Shihoru's personality.

Yume returned with [STAR PIERCE]. She had practiced her new knife throwing skill so much and with so many different weapons that she'd actually become pretty good with it. She had even bought a small set of throwing knives of her own—well, not exactly, as according to her, “Yume didn't know what knife to choose so Yume's master took Yume shoppin' and told Yume this one, this one, or this one and to pick only one but he bought it for Yume and it made Yume soooooo happy! Of course, Yume bought some with her own money too...”

It seemed as if Yume's Hunter's Guild master had taken quite a liking to her and Haruhiro couldn't blame him.

Mary returned with the light magic spell [LIGHT OF JUDGEMENT], an offensive spell that utilized the God of Light Luminous' power to punish the enemy. The range was short and the damage low, but it caused the bodies of its targets to go numb and slowed their movements for a short duration. Mary probably didn't intend to fight directly with this technique, but rather to support Mogzo and the other front line party members.

With everyone's new skills, the team's base fighting ability had improved. The power of Shihoru's new spell [SHADOW BIND] was an especially crucial addition.

“Shihoru, that's amazing! You stopped an elder in its tracks!” Haruhiro crowed.

They were on the third stratum of the Siren Mines, engaged with a kobold party led by one of those tough foremen who preferred to stand back and give orders rather than fight at the front. Shihoru's [SHADOW BIND] had rendered it unable to take so much as a step forward. Only its movement had been disabled, though, so it should have been able to continue giving orders to its followers, but it seemed the elder had fallen into a state of panic.

“Now! Take down the followers!” Haruhiro shouted.

Ranta however, not needing to be told, or disregarding that he hadn't been told yet, had his left hand extended, already charging at Follower A.

“Here comes the Dread Knight! For Skulheill! Tremble with fear, disbelievers! [DARK TERROR]!”

A purplish mist engulfed Follower A, entering its body through its nose and mouth. The kobold let out a short howl and leapt wildly at Ranta.

“Wha—!” Ranta immediately blocked the kobold’s blade with his longsword, but the kobold didn’t stop there. It launched a series of ferocious attacks void of any semblance of sanity. “What the—! Why—?! What the hell—?!” he shouted, deflecting the attacks. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!”

“...It does seem to have lost the ability to make good judgments though,” Haruhiro remarked.

In the end, Ranta was still Ranta. Haruhiro was dumb for expecting more out of him. There were two other followers; Mogzo made for Follower B while Yume headed to Follower C, but Mary was ahead of them both.

“O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous... [LIGHT OF JUDGEMENT]!”

Follower B, who was waiting for Mogzo, was bathed in light. Its entire body began to spasm violently.

Mogzo followed up immediately with his killer [RAGE CLEAVE], shouting, “THANK YOU!!”

Follower B went down and Mogzo immediately shifted over to help Yume. It was very like the dependable Mogzo to not use a new skill when the situation didn’t call for it.

“I guess there’s no other choice,” Haruhiro murmured and started over to help Ranta.

He was getting into position at Follower A’s back when something suddenly occurred to him. Ranta’s [DARK TERROR] wasn’t a skill that was meant to frighten away its targets, but instead force them into making a do-or-die counterattack. Ranta failed epically with it earlier, but Haruhiro actually benefited. Follower A was so intently focused on killing Ranta that it didn’t notice Haruhiro at all. He effortlessly took up his position at its back and... [BACKSTAB]? No, might as well try, “[WIDOW MAKER]!”

Haruhiro latched onto Follower A and locked both of its arms in place for the moment. He had become proficient at that much, but he still hadn’t mastered locking an opponent’s legs in place as well. But just getting the opponent’s arms pinned down increased the success rate of the technique massively. He rammed his dagger into the base of the kobold’s neck, slit its throat, and jumped away.

Follower A wasn’t stone dead just yet and, though it was unlikely, staying that close invited the possibility of getting counterattacked. But that wasn’t the only reason Haruhiro jumped away.

“TAAAAAAAAKE THIS!” Ranta shouted, jumping forward as he thrust his sword into the dying kobold. Then he subsequently finished it by stabbing it again through its heart with all his strength.

“YESSSS! GOT MY VICE! GOT MY VICE!” Ranta declared with a gleeful shout.

“That was reckless! You could have stabbed me through it!” Haruhiro yelled.

“If you die, it’s one more Vice for me! YES!!!”

Dumbass. But that much Haruhiro already knew. All he had to do was remember that dumbasses will be dumbasses and then he wouldn’t see so much red. But he was pissed. He was beyond goddamn “pissed”. Maybe he should just give up holding it in.

“YAH!” Yume cried, using [SWEEPING SLASH] quickly followed by [CROSS CUT]. The combination attack put Follower C on its back foot.

“THANK YOU!” Mogzo’s [RAGE CLEAVE] came without hesitation, ending the kobold on the spot.

“Everyone! To the foreman!” Haruhiro shouted, the obviousness of the statement making him a little embarrassed. But calling out to his team in moments like this also had the effect of encouraging everyone and boosting teamwork. And this was no time to start feeling shy. The kobold foreman was no longer disabled and the team moved to pound him into oblivion. Of course, the foreman was also desperate and would fight back hard. What was the best way to deal with an opponent like this?

Haruhiro and the others had learned the answer through experience. Four of them would surround it and rather than everyone attacking randomly, they waited for it to attack. Then person it attacked would defend while the other three counterattacked. They would repeat this process until the enemy was down.

As a result, they took down the elder kobold without anyone on the team getting injured. Ranta’s movements were as questionable as always but Haruhiro decided to let it go, since it was a completely one-sided victory.

“Haven’t you had enough of this stratum?” Ranta asked. “These enemies are way too easy. It’s about time we moved on, leveled up.”

“Here we go again...” Haruhiro sighed.

Haruhiro still wasn’t entirely convinced after they took down another foreman and two followers, but when they came across a sink well that led to the fourth stratum, Haruhiro seriously considered descending as a viable option. Everyone was fighting very well today and he wanted to keep the momentum going. On the other hand, he didn’t want today’s successes to make them overconfident. It was easy to get carried away at times like these.

“Hmm...” With the sink well right before his eyes, Haruhiro fell deep into thought.

His own feelings put him at fifty-fifty, descend or not.

“When are you going to quit being indecisive?!” Ranta demanded.

And Haruhiro had to admit that this time, and this time only, Ranta had a point. This was being a little too indecisive, even for Haruhiro. What were everyone else’s opinions of a leader like this? Shihoru’s and Mogzo’s expressions were anxious. Yume stared at him blankly. Mary was regarding him with a thoughtful expression. Ranta was the only one who was pissed off.

This was no good. When decision time came, he had to make a decision. So he did.

“Let’s do it tomorrow,” Haruhiro announced.

“WHAT!?” Ranta instantly protested.

Haruhiro had anticipated his resistance, but it still annoyed him.

“Nothing wrong with coming back tomorrow, right?” he replied. “We’ll have time to mentally prepare beforehand so it’s fine.”

“I’m already mentally prepared!!”

“You’re just one person! What about everyone else?!”

“So it’s my fault that I’m the only one who’s ready and the rest of you are chicken shit!?” Ranta spat.

Wow. Holy shit that pissed him off. He was going to explode with rage. Haruhiro closed his eyes and forced himself to take a deep breath. Getting angry didn’t do anyone any good. He had to control himself. Yes, self-control. But why? Why did he have to go to such lengths to control himself on Ranta’s account?

It was Ranta's fault. It was all goddamn Ranta.

When Haruhiro opened his eyes, he didn't look at Ranta. His self-control would evaporate if he so much as glimpsed Ranta's face right now.

"We'll call it a day now on the third stratum and descend to the fourth stratum tomorrow. Ranta disagrees with me. Anyone else feel the same?"

Everyone else agreed with Haruhiro. He expected Ranta to continue protesting, but to his surprise, Ranta merely shrugged his shoulders and backed off. Haruhiro didn't get him at all. What was Ranta thinking?

On their way back, they brought down another foreman and four kobold workers on the third stratum without suffering any injuries and then returned to Altana without further mishaps. Their earnings were comparatively good today. After eating dinner together, they headed to Sherry's Tavern for drinks.

When Kikkawa dropped by, the conversation grew lively. Kikkawa and Ranta were birds of a feather, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder and creating quite the ruckus together. *They've got matching personalities*, Haruhiro thought. And the more he thought about it, the more Haruhiro realized that he was the one most often at verbal odds with Ranta. Was it because he didn't have a matching personality?

Haruhiro left with everyone else, but then after they were well on their way back, he turned back to the tavern alone after offering up a few random excuses to the others. Mary was sitting alone at the far end of the first floor bar counter. She noticed Haruhiro approaching and turned her gaze towards him.

For a moment, he wondered anxiously what he would do if she told him to go away... Maybe he was chicken shit, just like Ranta said. He certainly wasn't courageous by any means. Luckily, his fears were unfounded.

Mary gave him a slight smile and asked, "What's the matter?"

"Ah, nothing in particular, really. Just... Do you mind if I sit here?"

"Not at all."

Haruhiro took the seat next to her. He noticed she was nursing a cup of that honey mead again, so he ordered the same for himself. He'd been eating and drinking pretty much anything he wanted lately. He wasn't worried about money, and a part of him was considering moving out of that shabby reserve force lodge, too.

"Mary, where do you live? Err—" He panicked, not meaning it to come out like that. "No! No, I mean... I didn't mean I want to know where you live. I was just thinking it was probably time to think about moving out of that lodge and... and I was err, wondering where would be, you know... just asking... for reference..."

"I rent a room at a run-of-the-mill lodge on Kaen Road," Mary replied casually. "It's a place only used by women, and I've lived there since the start."

"Oh. I see..." Haruhiro felt like an idiot for making a scene. If there was a hole nearby, he would crawl into it. Or not. He felt beads of sweat starting to run down his forehead and, careful to look casual, wiped it away with one hand. "Hm. Must be nice. I can see how it would be awkward to have a guy living next door."

"If you decide to move out of the lodge, I can probably introduce Yume and Shihoru to the owner," Mary offered.

"Yeah, they'll probably appreciate that a lot. But it's not like we've decided to move or anything yet. We haven't even talked about it, really. Everyone's okay with living there even though things get pretty inconvenient sometimes. We're all used to it now."

“The reserve force lodge...” Mary closed her eyes and took a sip of her drink. “Brings back memories.”

Haruhiro was certain that Mary was still with her old companions at the time she was living in the lodge. The companions no longer with her now.

“But the lodge has gotten pretty crowded recently,” Haruhiro said with a laugh. He hadn’t meant to laugh and didn’t know why he did it. “The new arrivals are there now, though our rooms are pretty far apart, so I haven’t really said more than passing greetings to any of them.”

“What sort of people are they?” Mary asked.

“No one like Renji,” replied Haruhiro. “But no one as pathetic as us either.”

“I don’t think there’s any reason to look down on yourself like that.”

“Oh. Is that how I came across?”

“A little.”

“Yeah. I guess I did.” Haruhiro felt like hanging his head in his hands, but settled with mussing his hands through his hair instead. “That’s not good. I wish I could project more confidence in myself, but... I guess I’m just not that type of person.”

“A cocksure, self-assured Haru?” Mary’s expression softened. “You’re right. That’s not like you at all.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so either. But there I go again with ‘I think, maybe, probably’. That’s not good either.”

“Are you sure you’re not overthinking it? Taking things too seriously?”

“Too seriously? Overthinking? Me? No way,” Haruhiro denied.

“Ranta too, you take him too seriously and that’s why you get into fights with him all the time,” Mary pointed out.

“Ahh... I see. That might be true, yeah. I should figure out a way to just *let it go* every time he says something.”

“It’s because you want to find a *perfect* solution that makes it so difficult. I think it’s better to just be more half-assed with him. Save the seriousness for when you really need it.”

“Half-assed...”

Haruhiro didn’t think he was the type of person who took everything seriously, but when it came to matters related to leadership of a party, he found himself agonizing over and ambivalent about every little decision. It was true that he did the best he could to seriously consider everything, but that was probably because he wasn’t a natural leader.

If he was suited for the role, if he had what it took to lead within him already, then he wouldn’t have to think about everything so deeply. And the conclusion he reached at the end of these extended periods of thinking was the same every time: If there was someone around who could take his place, he would give it to them.

Even during these chats with Mary, he got the overwhelming feeling that she was better suited to lead the party than he was and was tempted to ask her to do it. But he didn’t. He couldn’t bring himself to do something that pitiful.

“Mary, I’ve been meaning to ask you something...”

“What is it?”

“About the Siren Mines.”

“You mean...” Mary seemed to have more to say, but shut her lips abruptly.

Starting tomorrow, they would descend to the fourth stratum then eventually down the fifth, just like Mary’s previous party had. If they kept heading in this direction, then surely one day they would reach the place where Mary’s previous companions had died. Mary would have to set foot in that place once again.

Haruhiro knew, from personal experience, how tough that could be. It was bitter and heart-wrenching.

Anger welled up in the pit of his stomach every time he returned to that place to scout the plate-armored goblin and hobgoblin. It was sadness and anger beyond what he could bear. They had never returned to the place Manato died, always gave it a wide berth in fact, after their business there was done. If he could, he would forget its very existence.

“I was just wondering if you were okay with us working in the Mines. You’re not pushing yourself too hard, are you? I mean, it doesn’t seem like it, but...”

“It’s not... easy,” Mary said through gritted teeth. “Being down there doesn’t bring any good feelings. Not now, probably not ever.”

“I thought as much...”

“But... it’s something I *have* to do,” she said, shaking her head. “No, it’s something I want to do. If I don’t, I’ll never be able to move on. I’d never be able to do it alone though, and if I have to borrow the strength of others to do it... then I want to borrow yours. You and everyone else. Because you and the others consider me your companion and friend.”

For some reason, Haruhiro was deeply moved by those words. No, not for some reason, it was because he was very happy. Mary was actually *depending* on them. She considered Haruhiro and the others to be her friends and believed in them to see her through this. And she had actually said it out loud to Haruhiro. That made him happier than anything.

“I’m sorry to put such a burden on all of you,” Mary added.

It was sweet of Mary to say that and made Haruhiro want to give her a hug—not that he would even consider doing something as crazy as that. He couldn’t do it and he didn’t think Mary was looking for anything like that. But in that moment, she was undeniably cute in a way that made Haruhiro want to protect her... though his ability to actually do so was questionable.

“It’s no burden,” Haruhiro assured her with a smile.

He wished he could have shown her that it was worth placing her trust in him, but that wouldn’t be like him. At the very least though, he wanted her to rest assured.

Haruhiro continued, “It’s no burden at all. We’ll lend you all the strength we have. Well, we’ll do everything we can and if we can’t do it, then we can’t do it, but—I’m not coming off as very cool, am I?”

“I think you’re fine just the way you are, Haru.”

“Really? You really think so?”

Then in the quietest of whispers, almost embarrassed, it seemed, Mary said, “Thank you.”

Whoa. And in that moment, he felt as if he was going to fall in love with her. Except not really. He wasn't her type, after all.

Chapter 9: Let Go of Jealousy

Haruhiro was not a natural leader. He lacked both character and ability, and that was very difficult to remedy. But after talking to Mary last night, Haruhiro had renewed his determination to do his best as one. He doubted that he would ever become a great leader, but he decided to make that his goal nonetheless.

Now here they were, on the fourth stratum of the Siren Mines, just as Haruhiro had promised yesterday.

“Hey everyone, look here! Look! Look!” Yume bubbled, leaning over a fence while pointing to some kind of animal beyond it. “Ain’t those just darlin’?”

“What the—hell no!” came Ranta’s prompt refutation, and for once, Haruhiro had to agree.

The creatures tottering about beyond the fence looked sort of like pigs at first glance, but then again also resembled rats. They were something like shaved rats the size of pigs. No one knew what the kobolds called them, but reserve force soldiers referred to them as “pigrats”. *And an appropriate name it is*, Haruhiro agreed.

The area contained a number of these fenced pens to raise pigrats in them. But that wasn’t all.

“Yume thinks they’re absolutely darlin’. Those things over there are adorable too!” Yume said, running over to another pen. “Or... maybe not. Never mind. These aren’t cute at all...”

“What are those?” Rather than approach the barrier, Shihoru leaned forward for a look, but drew back terrified. “Eww, gross. Disgusting...”

Mogzo nodded and grunted his agreement.

“They’re...” Haruhiro glanced briefly at the creatures in the non-pigrat pen and wished that he hadn’t. “Absolutely horrendous. I get the feeling things that ugly were never meant to be seen.”

The corner of Mary’s mouth twitched slightly. “I think...I know exactly what you mean.”

The creatures had no arms, legs, or tail. Their bodies weren’t thin; they were plump, and they were long. It was like someone took a pig, tore off all its appendages and tail, then stretched it out lengthwise. Apparently, they were called “pigworms”, a name given to them by reserve force soldiers, and they were unexpectedly terrifying in appearance.

“Hmm...” Ranta reached out with his sword, attempting to poke one.

“Hey,” Haruhiro grabbed him. “Ranta, don’t.”

“What? Shut up, Haruhiro. Just trying it to see what happens. It’s not like I was being serious or anything.”

“How’s it possible to try and not be serious?” Haruhiro demanded and regretted the words the moment he did. All he had to do to was *let it go*, let the moment pass, but here he was again, treating Ranta way too earnestly.

“It’s perfectly possible for me,” Ranta retorted.

“Oh. Okay.”

“More-than-way-beyond perfectly possible. Got it?!”

“Yes, yes, got it,” Haruhiro said.

“Then repeat it for me!” Ranta demanded.

“It’s more-than-way-beyond perfectly possible for you,” Haruhiro repeated.

“Don’t do it using my exact words!”

Haruhiro ignored the raging Ranta and instead looked back at the herd of pigworms. The way they scrunched up their bodies and slithered along the ground was like something out of a nightmare.

“Don’t tell me that’s what kobolds eat...” Haruhiro murmured.

It was said that the fourth stratum of the Siren Mines was the agricultural sector. Their immediate surroundings was more for animal ranching than crops, but darkshrooms and ogreferns—even glow blossoms that produced their own light—all manner of plants that did not require sunlight were cultivated here.

Kobolds were living beings. If they didn’t eat, they would die. With the exception of lesser kobolds, they rarely ventured outside the mountain, so they had to sustain themselves down here somehow. The result was that, after all mineral ore here had been exhausted, the spacious fourth stratum was converted to farmland.

“Get down!” Mary suddenly said, pointing to the ground.

Haruhiro, Shihoru, Mogzo, and Ranta dropped immediately, but Yume remained standing.

“Hm? What’s goin—”

“Just do it!” Haruhiro grabbed her arm, intending to force her down to a crouch, but ended up making her fall backwards instead.

“Ow!” Yume yelped.

“S-sorry! But—wait, shh!” Haruhiro hushed, index finger at his mouth.

He said no more, but Yume nodded, apparently getting the message. Haruhiro and the others stayed crouched by the fence, motionless for a good three minutes before Ranta peeked over.

“Gone... I think,” he reported.

“You think?” Haruhiro slowly poked half his head above the fence and took a thorough look around. There was one elder kobold in the distance, but it had its back to them and was moving away. “It’s still there. Let’s wait a little longer.”

When Haruhiro looked again a minute later, a different elder had appeared and was coming their way. “Trouble!” he hissed.

“Oy oy oy,” Ranta sighed. “How long are we gonna hide? Let’s just take it out!”

Haruhiro’s expression turned thoughtful for a moment, but then he looked over at Mary and met her gaze. She shook her head.

“Don’t,” she advised. “This isn’t like the upper strata. If we fail to kill it in an instant, the noise from the fight will be like the spark that ignites an inferno.”

Ranta scoffed. “Fine. Then we take it out in one blow.”

“Easier said than done,” Haruhiro snapped, thoroughly annoyed.

“Maybe... it’s possible,” Shihoru suddenly said. “With my magic.”

“Ah,” Haruhiro’s eyes went wide. “That’s right. [PHANTOM SLEEP].”

“Yes,” Shihoru said. “But... we’ll be in real trouble if I miss. Maybe it’s better not to risk it...”

“You guys,” Ranta had his I-am-about-to-say-something-that’s-going-to-piss-everyone-off expression on again. “Always thinking about stuff negatively is like being afraid to drink water because it might be poisoned or something. You get what I mean? Yeah?”

Haruhiro wished that if Ranta was going to try to make up analogies, he could have at least put more effort into thinking up one that was more appropriate to the situation. And with that silent rebuttal, Haruhiro let the moment of confrontation pass. As the party leader, it was vital that he acquired this *let it go* skill.

“Shihoru,” Haruhiro said instead. “If you’re not confident, we don’t have to do it. But since you came up with the idea, I think we should try, if you believe you can pull it off.”

It was rare for timid Shihoru to speak up on her own and Haruhiro wanted to encourage that, and give her his support. Shihoru’s gaze remained on the ground for several moments before she finally lifted her head and said, “...I want to try it.”

No one was against it. They approached to within sixty-five feet, the maximum cast range of [PHANTOM SLEEP], before Shihoru popped her head and staff up over the fence, chanting, “Oom rel eckt krom dash!”



The shadow elemental that shot from the tip of her staff wasn't as fast as [SHADOW ECHO]'s elemental, but it was stealthy. It flew without a sound and hit the elder right in the face. The elemental seeped into the elder's body through its nose, ears, and mouth. The elder began to sway, and it fell over in short order.

"Nice!" Haruhiro gave the signal and everyone attacked the sleeping elder as one unit. No time to think about the dishonorable tactic—they had to finish it quickly. The one to do so was Ranta. Why was it that Ranta was always fastest to act in these types of situations?

"Piece of cake Vice!," laughed Ranta fiendishly. Everyone, hurry up and strip it of its valuables!"

"Since when did you become the one giving the orders?" Haruhiro retorted without thinking. This was no good. *Let it go. Gotta let it go.*

Unlike the elders occupying the third stratum, fourth stratum elders were equipped with iron scale mail and iron-tipped whips that hung looped at their waists. The elder's talisman was a blue-tinged silver earring and looked like it would fetch quite a good price.

"Easy win for us, but Yume feels kinda sorry for the eldie. Nicely done, Shihoru," Yume complimented. "You sure pew-pew'd it with your magic."

"A-agreed," Mogzo added. "Shihoru deserves all the credit for that one."

"I-I... err..." Embarrassed by the compliments, Shihoru shrank back.

"They're right," Haruhiro said, turning to Shihoru and giving her a thumbs up. "You were perfect. Really. Now we know that we can use this method to take out one enemy if we can manage to sneak up on it."

"Don't forget that I'm the one who actually killed it," Ranta interjected.

Right, Haruhiro thought. *Let it go.*

"The body," Mary said as she made the Priest's hexagon gesture. "We shouldn't leave it out in the open like this."

"Yeah," Haruhiro said, looking at the pens surrounding them. "Let's move it into one of the pens for now."

After stripping the elder's body of its valuables, Haruhiro and Mogzo carried it into a pigrat pen. Haruhiro wanted Ranta to help out too, but didn't think it was worth the trouble of asking.

It was then that something truly horrifying happened.

"What the—" Haruhiro started.

The pigrats surrounded the body, making *boo-hee boo-hee* squealing noises and then... *No way... They're not going to eat it... right?*

Wrong. They devoured it in a frenzy, each greedily fighting another over the carcass..

"I guess that's what we call the 'food chain'," Yume whispered.

But was that really the issue here? Haruhiro had a feeling that she wasn't quite grasping the crux of the matter.

Shihoru crouched down, holding onto her staff for support, looking faint. Mary put one hand over her mouth, as if suppressing the urge to vomit; Mogzo's expression was dumbfounded.

“Well, well. How convenient,” Ranta said, strange smirk on his face and looking the picture of uninvolved bystander. Even though he wasn’t. “We can kill, kill, kill all we want and then dump the bodies for the pigrats to clean up. It’s kinda gross, since the kobolds are gonna eat the pigrats at some point, but it’s not like we’re the cannibals, so whatever. I pretty much knew this was gonna happen though.” Ranta finished with a weak laugh.

“Then, why are your legs shaking?” Haruhiro asked, to which Ranta replied with, “W-w-what?!”, and a threatening gesture. But Ranta’s face was so pale, Haruhiro wasn’t in the least bit intimidated.

Ranta continued, “M-my legs aren’t shaking! I-I’m not shaking anywhere! I-it’s cause you’re shaking that makes it look like I’m shaking, ‘kay!”

“What’s ‘kay’?” Haruhiro asked mildly.

“Shut it! ‘Kay’ is... ‘Kay’ means... Uhh... ‘K’ stands for Killer!”

“No need to force yourself if you’re feeling queasy, Ranta,” Haruhiro offered.

“E-eeediot! I’m fine! This is nothing! In fact, it’s my favorite! Because Dread Knights love the grotesque and erotic!”

“Grotesque, fine. Erotic doesn’t seem to be relevant to anything here.”

“But I want it to! ‘Cause I’m a manly man!”

Before they had any more time to think deeper about this particular method of disposing bodies, the sudden noise caused by the pigrats getting an unexpected treat brought four elders running to the scene. Haruhiro and the others were forced to hide again, but this time, remaining where they were would be dangerous. They had to get away from here.

The pigrat and pigworm pen fences were tall, making it relatively easy to keep themselves out of sight; however, the number of kobold elders at the pens had suddenly increased again. The darkshroom, ogrefern, and glow blossom plots were wide open without any fences. They would be plainly visible to low ranked and regular kobold workers there.

Haruhiro and the others were forced to make a covert rush from one end of the fourth stratum, and then back to the center where they hid in the corner of an empty pen.

“Do you think this stratum might be too much for us?” Haruhiro, leaning against the fence wall, asked Mary.

Mary looked thoughtful before saying, “The conditions here aren’t very good. My team also—” She cut herself off, expression troubled.

Afraid of making things awkward for Haruhiro and the others, she hadn’t intended to say “my team” or make any mention of her former companions while with them. Haruhiro was about to tell her not worry about it, but he was beaten to it.

“Whatever. No need to worry about stuff like that all the time.” And by Ranta, of all people. Ranta continued, “Does it look like we’re that petty? Not me. I’m big-hearted. Big, wide, and wild too. Feel free to fall in love with me any moment now.”

“Um, no thanks,” came Mary’s prompt reply.

Ranta purposely fell himself over at the instant rejection, his silliness actually making Mary smile ever so slightly. Haruhiro suddenly felt his chest tighten with annoyance. *What?* Could it possibly be jealousy he was feeling now? Jealous of *Ranta*? No way...

Haruhiro cleared his throat, getting a grip on himself. “What about conditions on the fifth stratum then?”

“Compared to here? Better, probably...” Mary replied carefully.

“Ah...” Yume nodded.

“If that’s the case, then...” Shihoru offered nervously. “Should we descend?”

Mogzo gave a firm nod.

Ranta grinned broadly. “It’s decided then.”

Chapter 10: Not Supposed to be Cool

Hot... that was the first thing that came to mind after descending a sink well from the fourth to fifth stratum. While the fourth stratum was comfortably cool, the fifth stratum was completely not. The temperature was much higher and the reason was immediately apparent. Forges, both large and small, lined the tunnel paths.

The fifth stratum was a refinery, where excavated ore was brought to be smelted. Not all the forges were in use, but the lit ones were occupied by busy-looking kobolds. Other worker kobolds lounged around spaces apparently used for breaks. Some areas were crammed full of kobolds while others were fairly quiet. Once in a while, an elder and its underlings would appear.

There were also spots that made for good hunting grounds for reserve force soldiers, one of which Mary guided them to. It was a cul-de-sac at one end of the stratum, but the path made a large, round-about loop, so it wasn't actually a dead end.

The spot was a good distance from any of the forges, but not too far from the worker kobolds' break areas or the lookout posts where the elders supervised everyone. It was an area kobolds might enter if they went for a walk between shifts and once in a while, kobolds could be seen drawing near.

This was where Haruhiro and the others laid in wait... except no kobolds came. Ranta, growing impatient, growled in exasperation.

Yume sighed in annoyance. "If you can't be patient, then why not try taking a nap?"

"If I fall asleep," Ranta countered, "you guys will decide it's boring here and leave me behind."

"Darnit. Foiled again."

"Damn right, Ms. Washboard. I know what you're thinking before you even think it. I see right through you!"

"Don't call Yume that!" Yume said.

"I'll call you whatever I want, stupid! Flat flat flat flat flat flat flat flat!"

Yume's expression turned stormy.

"Y-Yume..." Shihoru said, gently patting Yume on the back, "I don't think your boobs are small."

"Shihoru's got big boobs, so that doesn't make Yume feel better!"

"Oh... I... sorry... but I'm just fat... I'm sorry..."

"Yume too," Yume said apologetically. "Don't mind what Yume said. It ain't your fault you have big boobs and it ain't like Yume made her boobs small on purpose. And Yume uses a bow now 'n then 'cause Yume's a Hunter so she sometimes thinks havin' big boobs would just get in the way..."

"Um... that might be true," Shihoru agreed hesitantly.

"Yume's prob'ly a natural born Hunter," Yume said.

"What kind of weird reasoning is that?" Ranta challenged.

Haruhiro found himself agreeing just a tiny bit with Ranta this time, but it was definitely better not to involve himself in the conversation. This was one of those *let it go* moments. *Let it go... Just let it go...* He had a feeling that gaining experience with this *let it go* skill with the intention of leveling up got him closer to achieving some goal.

The fifth stratum was a clangorous place, but this hunting spot they occupied now was relatively quiet. Noise also echoed easily, since it was a mining tunnel. They could hear footsteps approaching. Most likely kobolds.

Haruhiro lifted his hand and pointed a finger in that direction. He then gave a thumbs up, and turned it down immediately. It was the hand sign for “enemies approaching, get ready” they had all decided upon after they had starting coming to the mines.

Yume readied her bow and nocked an arrow, closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. Shihoru and Mary readied their staves. Mogzo unsheathed his bastard sword, Ranta did the same with his longsword, and Haruhiro followed suit with his dagger.

The kobold came into view. An elder. Yume opened her eyes; they moved with that particular motion indicating that she had activated [SHARP SIGHT], a skill that allowed her to track movement with a higher amount of precision. She shot. The elder cried out as her arrow hit it in the face.

The elder went down writhing in agony but behind it came another. That one was an elder too. Two of them, Elder A was wounded while the other was unharmed.

“Mogzo, to the unwounded one!” Haruhiro ordered and Mogzo ran to obey.

“DIEEEEE!” Ranta was already charging at Elder A.

Yume had dropped her bow and unsheathed her kukri. Shihoru chanted, “Oom rel eckt vel dash!” the [SHADOW ECHO] spell. The black seaweed-like shadow elemental burst from the tip of her staff.

Elder B was fending off Mogzo’s attacks with a broad-bladed sword but in that moment, the shadow elemental hit it right in the stomach. It started quivering uncontrollably. Mogzo pressed Elder B’s sword down with a shout then lifted his own bastard up and brought it down on the elder’s head. The elder kobold twisted its body away at the last second, and Mogzo’s sword only grazed the side of its head instead of splitting its skull.

In the meantime, Ranta while shouting his fury, had driven his longsword through Elder A’s chest. Just as Haruhiro and Yume made to help Mogzo, Elder B made an about-face.

“Don’t let it get away!” Mary shouted.

Yume switched her kukri to her left hand and with her right, pulled out a throwing knife and hurled it at the elder. Her [STAR PIERCE] skill hit Elder B right below its shoulder but rather than go down, it kept running. Mogzo was right behind it, heavy armor clanking with ever step, sword raised but out of range.

“I’ll get him!” Haruhiro quickened his pace, pushed Yume aside and passed ahead of Mogzo. Elder B’s back was to him and since it was so preoccupied with running away, it wasn’t taking any precautions to protect itself. It was also wounded and unsteady on its feet. At this rate, Haruhiro could catch up.

“[WIDOW MAKER]!” Haruhiro jumped onto it back, slit its throat in the same motion, and leapt away again.

The elder staggered for a bit, then crashed to the ground.

Haruhiro let out a sigh of relief, “I did it...”

“Got my Vice!” Ranta cried in a savage tone.

So it seemed that Kobold A was now dead too.

“For some reason...” Haruhiro found himself loose-lipped and couldn’t help it.

It wasn’t the cleanest fight ever, but it didn’t go too badly either. They didn’t put any unnecessary burden on their Priest, Mary, everyone contributed their combat specialties, and they were able to finish it quickly. It was almost like actual teamwork.

“For some reason, I think that went really well,” Haruhiro continued. “Don’t you guys think so too?”

“A-agreed,” Mogzo said, his barbute helm moving up and down in a nodding motion. “I think so too.”

“Yeah,” Yume said, nostrils flaring as she used her left hand to pat herself on the right shoulder. “Yume’s arrow and throwin’ knife were amazin’. Yume kinda feels sorry for the eldie but feels pretty good about herself.”

Shihoru smiled, “It was like we had a good rhythm going. Like we naturally knew who was going to do what next and that’s exactly how it worked out.”

“Yes,” Mary flashed them a slight smile. “I think it was well done.”

“AND IT’S ALL BECAUSE OF ME!!!” Ranta proclaimed. “ALL BECAUSE OF ME AND ALL IS MINE!”

Haruhiro guessed it was too much to expect Ranta to act any differently. Well, all he had to do was *let it go*... but he couldn’t.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Haruhiro challenged. “Is that supposed to be some sort of cool line?”

“No, wait a sec... I meant THE WORLD! Not all! I meant the world is mine!”

“Oh. Good for you then.”

“You don’t think it’s good at all! You’re just saying that!” Ranta accused.

“Nope. I think it’s good,” said Haruhiro. “It’s great. Congrats.”

“Thanks!” Ranta kicked at the ground. “And why do I have to thank you of all people anyway?!”

If it was the same pattern as usual, Haruhiro would be pissed off at this point, but he actually found it kind of funny and laughed despite of himself. Everyone was in good spirits while they collected the loot. Suddenly, Haruhiro felt something strange... something wrong. He quickly glanced around.

“What’s wro—” Mary started to say, but before she could finish, she saw the same thing as Haruhiro... A head poking out from just beyond where the tunnel path curved out of sight. A kobold. It had to be.

When the kobold realized that Haruhiro and Mary had noticed it, it ducked back out of view.

“Hey... pretty nice,” Ranta said as he relieved Elder A’s corpse of its talisman. “Looks like this’ll fetch a really good price...”

“Wait,” Haruhiro said, raising a hand to shut Ranta up. “Mary, thoughts?”

“What?” Ranta craned his neck for a look. “What’s going on?”

“What’s wrong?” Yume, on one knee by the body of Elder B, asked. Shihoru, crouched next to Yume turned to Haruhiro, blinking in confusion. “Hm? What—”

Mogzo grunted and bent down low.

Mary placed a finger on her chin, “Thoughts, you say...”

A long, ear piercing howl resembling a dog’s split the air. But the howler was certainly no dog. A kobold. A worker or an elder, Haruhiro couldn’t tell, but it had to be that kobold that had spotted them just now.

“O-oy...” Ranta gulped hard and put a hand over his mouth. “What the... that doesn’t sound good...”

Mary’s eyes were wide, the panic in them obvious. “This is bad. That’s a...”

Another loud howl, answered in return by several others of the same kind. The howling had now become one continuous stream. That first kobold had started it, then another had answered, then another, and another, and another in succession.

“R-run!” Haruhiro’s decision came immediately.

Yume grabbed Shihoru by the arm and dragged her to her feet, “C’mon Shihoru, get up!”

Run. They had to run. Run like hell. *But where to?* For a split second, Haruhiro had no idea. *Calm down!* Then he remembered, it didn’t matter. This tunnel path at the end of the cul-de-sac was circular. It was the same no matter which direction they went. But after this then where to next?

The fifth stratum was a like a twisted maze of passages. Could they get back to the sink well that led to the fourth stratum without getting lost? He didn’t have a terrible sense of direction, but he wasn’t great with them either. *It’ll be okay...* For some reason, he had the feeling that they would be okay, but he wasn’t entirely confident. It was very much like him to waver back and forth like this.

“Follow me!” Mary said, springing into a run.

Oh. Right. Mary had been down here once before. All they had to do was follow her.

“E-everyone, let’s go!” Haruhiro said, even though no one had to be told.

He trailed close behind Mary, turning to look back as he ran to make sure everyone was still with him and acutely aware of how much of a loser he was. Though he was the leader, he had been the first to turn tail. In that moment, he had forgotten all about his companions. Completely pathetic. Beyond embarrassing. Yume and Shihoru were completely panicked. He had to calm them down.

Calm down?! At a time like this? How?!

“It’s fine! So just—” Haruhiro immediately felt like swallowing his words. *Just how is it fine?* the straight man in him wisecracked. He was not fine. If he wasn’t so preoccupied, he would have laughed at how not fine he was. He was going mad, surely.

He couldn’t run very well with his head turned backwards, so he shifted his gaze forwards again. Everything was shaking. His field of vision was swaying. Things were shaking and swaying so hard he wanted to ask why in the world everything was shaking this hard. His heartbeat drummed loudly in his ear. Oh. Maybe that was why. It felt like his heart was going to jump up and leap out of his mouth.

They exited the cul-de-sac and a little further down, ran past a lookout post then a break area. Both were empty when they had passed by earlier, but not anymore. The break area was full of worker kobolds who immediately rushed towards them.

“Shit! Shit shit shit!” The expletives unwittingly rolled off his tongue. *Shit!* and *What do we do?!* alternately rampaged through his mind.

Mary’s pace slowed so Haruhiro followed suit. *Oh. So that’s why.* A pack of kobolds were directly in their path; they would run straight into them if they kept going. But it was a dead end if they turned back. The only option was to force their way through. Not with Mary in front though.

“M-Mogzo!” Haruhiro turned and yelled. “F-front! Get up here! Use [WAR CRY]!”

“R-right!” Mogzo replied, a hint of desperation in his tone, as his armored form clattered its way past Mary and Haruhiro to the front.

Fourteen kobolds, maybe more, met Mogzo with flaming brands, intent on killing him. Mogzo suddenly halted as he was pelted with a number of those flaming sticks. Without so much as flinching, Mogzo planted both feet firmly down and roared into the air; a Warrior’s [WAR CRY] skill.



Through a special way of pitching his voice, the deafening [WAR CRY] shout intimidated enemies. Being unprepared for [WAR CRY] would stop human, monster, or any other living being in its tracks. It made some of the kobolds in front of them jump into the air while incapacitating others with fright. Some even backed away, head in their hands.

“NOW!” Mogzo yelled, tone gruff and masculine.

Haruhiro ran as if his life depended on it, shouting, “Everyone at once!”

Ranta shouted as he charged. Mary was right beside Haruhiro. What about Yume? Shihoru? Haruhiro glanced behind him. Both were present.

“R-run! Go! Go go go!” He cried.

Was that the only thing he could think to say? Pathetic. Haruhiro and Mary quickly caught up with Mogzo. Mogzo wasn’t a fast runner by nature and his armor slowed him down even more. The clanking of his plate mail echoed through the tunnel. *Should I pass him and run up ahead?* Haruhiro wondered. No, not a good idea. More kobolds had appeared in their path. Lots more. How many? He had no idea.

“I can’t use it again! Not so soon!” Mogzo said raggedly, running for all he was worth.

So [WAR CRY] wasn’t a skill that could be used in succession. What were they going to do?

“W-we’ll have to charge through them!” Haruhiro said.

A small voice inside of him asked, *Charge? Bum rush? Really?* But there wasn’t a better option, was there? What he really wanted was to take all the frustration at the indecisiveness he was feeling now out on someone, but this wasn’t the time or place.

“ARGH!” Mogzo cried out.

Kobolds were ramming themselves into him, shrieking their own battle cries. Three of them, then a fourth threw themselves at him, piling themselves on top. Mogzo fell to the ground, rolling over repeatedly, but the momentum of the roll also somehow brought him back to his feet. Mogzo too, looked bewildered as if he had no idea what just happened.

“Keep going, Mogzo!” Haruhiro yelled.

Mogzo recovered immediately and continued running with a series of shouts. Haruhiro had no idea what he was shouting, but whatever.

“Turn right!” Mary said.

Ranta suddenly shouted, accompanied by Shihoru’s shrieks. Haruhiro turned around and saw that a kobold had latched itself onto the hem of Shihoru’s mage robes. Yume chopped at the kobold’s hand with her kukri, lopped it off, and prevented Shihoru from being dragged to the ground.

In the meantime, Mogzo was swinging his sword in broad strokes as he ran, forcing the kobolds directly in their path to scatter. Mary too, struck any kobold that got within range of her staff. *And I’m not doing anything...* Haruhiro thought. Just running. Not that there was much he could do but run.

How did this happen? How did things turn out like this? Everything was going well. Really well. Everyone was feeling good, the mood was light, and morale was sky high. Was it perhaps... they got overconfident because everything was going so smoothly? No, things hadn’t gotten to that point. They were on the verge of it though. One step away from crossing that line.

Had they been careless then? Inattentive?

Haruhiro couldn't deny it. They hadn't noticed that whistleblower kobold until it was too late. Too late? Really? Wasn't there something Haruhiro could have done then, but failed to do? He couldn't say with certainty that there was absolutely nothing he could have done to prevent this.

They had gotten too lighthearted.

Nothing good ever came of getting caught up in the moment. They had lost Manato too, when they all thought that they had everything handled. And now here they were again, repeating the same mistake. Haruhiro had failed to learn the lesson Manato had paid for with his life.

“What am I doing...”

He was pathetic. Worse than worthless and irredeemably so. But blaming himself for the mistake wasn't going to make their situation any better. But he also didn't think there was anything he could do turn things back in their favor.

Not possible. They wouldn't be able to get away. It was over. Finished.

The kobolds were too numerous. There were just too many. If they went straight ahead, kobolds. Turned around, kobolds. To the right, kobolds. To the left, kobolds. The tunnels were full of kobolds. Where were they? Haruhiro had no idea. He was just following Mary.

Mogzo had slowed down considerably, but if Haruhiro went past him, he would be in the lead. He couldn't. He couldn't be in the front. There was no way he could be at the front lines.

Mogzo's breathing came in ragged gasps. He must have been exhausted but he never stopped swinging his sword as he ran. No, he was *forcing* himself as if it was a matter of life or death. Mogzo was doing his best for them.

I'm sorry, Haruhiro apologized silently, wanting to cry. “Mogzo... I'm so sorry. I'm a useless good-for-nothing...”

But even if he was, he still had to do something. Even if it was just a moment, he had to let Mogzo rest or he would never make it. And without Mogzo the rest of them would never make it out of here either.

“Mogzo, fall back! I'll take your place!” Haruhiro shouted.

He was afraid. So scared that he wanted to cry. But whatever happened, happened. With a furious cry, Haruhiro charged ahead, out in front of Mogzo and was immediately assaulted by kobolds charging in at him.

Kobolds, kobolds, what the hell, kobolds, Mogzo, what the hell, ridiculous crazy scary, shit shit shit, NO WAY, shit I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die...

It hurt, so he had probably been hit and cut all over the place, but he had no idea where he'd been injured. He also had no idea how he was forcing the kobolds back enough so they could keep running ahead. He was operating on pure... instinct? Or something resembling that. Wait. *Am I even moving?* No idea.

At that moment, all he knew was one thing and one thing only: An elder kobold was standing right in front of him, sword raised and ready to split Haruhiro's head open. To Haruhiro, everything seemed to have suddenly stopped and silence fell over the entire scene.

He couldn't hear a single sound... A strange silence.

Haruhiro saw himself sitting in a chair, in a room somewhere that was familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time. *What am I doing there, in that place?* Then he was in a different place, surrounded by people who looked familiar yet unfamiliar at the same time. He was laughing. Now he was in some sort of vehicle, going somewhere it seemed. There were others riding in the same vehicle. Who? They seemed familiar, but he didn't recognize them. Who were they?

He was crouched in front of a large, box-like thing glowing with bright but indistinct lighting. Standing next to him was a girl with a bob-cut style hair.

Choco...

That's what Haruhiro called Bob-Cut Girl. Choco. Who was she? He didn't know. But *Choco...* for some reason, he got the feeling that he knew her.

Who was she?

Where had they met? Had they met somewhere? He saw it now, that place. Where was it?

Choco. Hey, Choco... Who are you? Do you know me? Where was it? When was it? When and... there at that place, I knew you...

But Haruhiro didn't know. He couldn't remember—no, it was as if the knowledge would disappear the moment he was about to recall it. Choco's face... her physique... he couldn't recall what they looked like. Choco. But her name he did remember. That was the only thing that didn't disappear; it remained with him.

Not that it mattered because he was about to die. The kobolds' movements seemed slower than usual, but they were no longer completely still like they were moments before. Things were moving now but Haruhiro couldn't move. He couldn't dodge the elder's sword and he wasn't wearing a protective helm like Mogzo either. There would be no saving him if he took a blow from a sword like that to the head.

He was probably going to die. *Oh, what's this?* Something like his life flashing before his eyes? So he was going to die after all.

Choco, I'm going to die. I wish I could meet you. I don't know anything but your name, but I wish we could have met...

It wasn't possible now.

Nevertheless he wanted to at least go down trying. *Dodge! Do something! Anything!* But Haruhiro didn't think he had even the slightest chance of actually avoiding the blow. The kobold blade's approach was accelerating. Down it came. Haruhiro raised his arm. He had to do something to block it. His arm wasn't going to make it in time.

“[ANGER THRUST!]”

Haruhiro, his arm half-raised, thought that if Ranta hadn't leapt in and thrust his sword into the base of the kobold's throat, Haruhiro's head would have been split in half.

“Haha! Make way for Lord Ranta!” he proclaimed.

Haruhiro had no idea how Ranta could move like that, spinning his body around and around as he swung out with his longsword, and then suddenly reversing the spin direction.

“[PROPEL LEAP!]”

“What the—!” Haruhiro was rendered speechless.

It was an ass attack. He had used [PROPEL LEAP] to launch himself backwards, zooming directly into the kobold standing behind him; but rather than ramming into it with his body, Ranta had sent it flying with his butt.

“YES! I’m frickin’ awesome!” Ranta said with relish.

“THANK YOU!” Mogzo’s [RAGE CLEAVE] came less than a heartbeat behind, taking down its target kobold. Mary sent another flying another with [SMASH]. Yume drove a kobold back with her kukri while Shihoru’s staff landed a blow as it retreated.

“Haruhiro!” Ranta shouted as he, using his helmet, withstood a kobold’s red-hot brand and then drove his sword through its stomach. “You’re weak as balls, so be more careful! We’ll be in trouble if you die!”

“I know!” Haruhiro yelled back.

He didn’t need to be told. Not by *Ranta*... the only person Haruhiro didn’t want to hear it from. But he deserved it. Haruhiro completely gave up. He was near desperation. He was useless like this. *A leader, huh?* He was too incompetent. He was weak, just like Ranta said. It was impossible for him to make decisions so calmly.

But even so, he was going to do it. He couldn’t afford to become mentally defeated. The enemy wasn’t kobolds. Hardly. The true enemy here was his own weak self.

“Mary! How much further to the sink well?!” Haruhiro called.

“Just a little more!” came her reply.

“Alright! Hang in there everyone, we’re almost there!” Haruhiro cried. “Get closer to the walls! Put your backs to it if things get too bad! Better to be surrounded in just three directions instead of all four! Ranta, to the front! We’re counting on you! Mogzo, protect our rear! Yume and Mary stay at the sides! Shihoru, don’t do anything rash! We’re going to get out of here, one step at a time, forward!”

No one was unhurt. Everyone bore injuries all over, but no one had lost hope either. Haruhiro had been close to despairing, but he was fine again. Now that he had taken a good look, the kobolds surrounding them weren’t stacked that deeply. It wasn’t so bad as ten or twenty layers of kobolds. There were a lot of them, yes, but no one was commanding them.

Their movements were disorganized, scattered, and they backed away quickly at any counterattack made by Haruhiro’s group. Maybe it was because they had the overwhelming advantage in numbers, but they weren’t fighting very seriously. Of course, it wasn’t like they were playing around, but rather than surrounding, pressing in, and finishing them, the kobolds were chasing them around; toying with them.

On the other hand, Haruhiro and the others fought gravely and desperately, killing any kobold in their way without hesitation. To the kobolds, dying wasn’t the preferred outcome, so they were quick to back away. So Haruhiro and the others were only *loosely* surrounded. They were still able to continue moving, to continue running.

There was no avoiding fear with truly terrifying things, but there was no need to be more afraid than necessary. Overestimating a threat and falling into panic resulted in inability to do the things you usually could.

“That’s the sink well!” Haruhiro called out. “Shihoru, you’re first. Mary’s next! Then Yume, me, Ranta, and Mogzo!”

With Ranta leading the way, Yume, Mary, and Haruhiro cut a path the rest of the way to the sink well. This particular well was small, with only one rope ladder attached to its lip. Shihoru climbed on but stopped, hesitant. Yelling at her to hurry wasn't good, Haruhiro knew. It would just fluster her more.

"It's okay!" he said instead. "Take it slow! You don't have to rush!"

The moment the words came out of his mouth, the hazy **line** of light appeared, connecting to a kobold that just happened to have its back turned towards him. Haruhiro's body moved, smooth as butter, and his dagger slid easily into its back.

Mary was now making her way up the ladder, followed by Yume.

"Go, Haruhiro!" Ranta stripped off his bucket helm, took aim, and hurled it at his target kobold with a yell. "[PROPEL LEAP]! [HATRED'S CUT]!"

With [PROPEL LEAP] he sent himself flying backwards; he hit the kobold behind him with another ass attack and the follow-up [HATRED'S CUT] hit the kobold directly in front. It was another pretty convincing façade of bravery.

A loud cry echoed through the air. Mogzo's [WAR CRY] had cowed the kobolds around the sink well. It was now or never. Haruhiro started to climb nimbly up the rope ladder; he was actually pretty good at stuff like this.

"Ranta, you're next! C'mon!" Haruhiro called down.

"No! Mogzo, you first!" Ranta said, slapping Mogzo on the back with the flat of his sword. "You're slower so get moving!"

Mogzo did as he was told. Probably not because he was convinced by the argument as much as he was taken by surprise. Mogzo was coming, so Haruhiro couldn't stop. He had no choice but to continue climbing too.

"Ranta! Hurry up!" Haruhiro said again.

"Right!"

Haruhiro heard the reply, but Ranta never came. Instead of Ranta, kobolds began scrambling up the rope ladder. Mogzo kicked them back down, but others clambered up in their place.

"Mogzo, get yourself up here first!" Haruhiro ordered as he reached the fourth stratum and tried to help pull Mogzo the rest of the way up too. But... heavy. He was way too heavy. "ARGH!"

"We're coming!" Mary, Yume, and Shihoru grabbed Mogzo and between the four of them, they somehow got Mogzo up out of the well.

Mogzo was alright, but Ranta... What about Ranta? Ranta was...

Ranta was not coming up the ladder. It was kobold after kobold after kobold. And they kept coming and coming.

"RANTA!" Haruhiro cried. No response, but then through the furious howling of the kobolds, he thought he heard Ranta's muffled voice, "Get going! I'll be right behind!"

"Right behind—" Haruhiro repeated incredulous. "Mogzo! Take care of the ones coming up!"

Mogzo yelled, bashing any kobold that arrived at the top of the ladder with his bastard sword. He crushed one kobold's face in with a swing, making it fall into those beneath it. They all fell down the well in a big

jumble, causing the kobolds below to bark and yelp. The prospect of meeting the same fate seemed to be making them hesitant to climb themselves.

“...the ladder!” Shihoru grabbed the rope ladder.

Right. If they pulled the ladder up...

“Alright!” Haruhiro hurried to help Shihoru and together they began reeling in the rope. It was about halfway up when he stopped and said, “B-but...”

Yume placed her hands on the edge of the well and leaned over for a look. “Ranta!” she called.

“Just for now...” Shihoru said.

Haruhiro nodded and pulled the ladder the rest of the way up. Shihoru was right. Once the kobolds down there had given up, they could descend again. As things stood now, even Ranta wouldn’t be able to get anywhere near this particular sink well.

Ranta... Had he been able to get away? Make a run for it somehow? To be perfectly honest, Haruhiro doubted it. Ranta always seemed to have the devil’s luck with him, but this time even that wouldn’t help.

“Stupid!” Haruhiro pounded at the ground. “Ranta, what the hell! ‘You go first’... trying to act cool! It’s not like you! You’re not supposed to be cool...”

No one said a word. The kobolds were still in an uproar at the bottom of the sink well. *Damn it...* What to do now? What were they going to do?

Haruhiro and the others were fine. No one was uninjured, but no one was hurt badly enough that they were incapacitated. Not counting Ranta. If it weren’t for Ranta, there would be no question about hastily making their way out of the mines right away. *If* Ranta were still with them.

But even without Ranta, they would probably be able to make it out of here. *Leave Ranta behind...* Should they go after him? Descend down a different sink well and search? Of course it would be dangerous. They didn’t even know if he was still alive. Maybe he was already dead. If he was already dead, then any effort they made to search would be a futile effort.

What am I thinking? Why am I assuming Ranta’s dead? But the reality was, it was a possibility. Haruhiro didn’t think that one person being chased by that many kobolds could get away for long. If it were Haruhiro down there, he knew that he wouldn’t have been able to. He would have just given up.

What about Ranta? Maybe Ranta wouldn’t give up...

“Haru...” Mary had called his name, pulling him out of his preoccupation.

Damn. He really had fallen deep into thought.

“Err... Yes?” he replied.

“Kobolds!” she yelled.

“No way—!”

But it was true. Haruhiro looked in the direction Mary was pointing and saw that kobolds were running straight at them; elders in the lead, their workers close behind.

“There’s a ton of them!” Yume cried, looking as if she was really about to cry.

Mogzo stuttered something incomprehensible. Shihoru shook her head back and forth as if saying, no, no, no. Then she said, “W-we have to r-run!”

Haruhiro’s mind went blank for a fraction of a second. But only a fraction. There was no more time for hesitation. He sprung to his feet. “Everyone, run!”

Chapter 11: Leave this to Me

Aren't I awesome?

Fuck yes. I'm such a badass. I'm the man, bigger than Jesus. Wait, who's Jesus? Um, the Black God? Skulheill? Whatever, doesn't matter. I'm still the shit.

'Cause I'm not dead yet.

Ranta huffed a heavy sigh. Even for the genius of Lord Ranta, however, this might have been a bit too much to chew. Maybe he was even... finished? Everything... kind of looked that way. Sort of. Like it was THE END. Maybe.

It's not as if the thought failed to cross his mind.

He started to shit himself. Except not really. Okay, maybe he did. Just a little.

But the most important thing was that he was still alive. It was a miracle. Ranta was able to do what no one else could. *Nothing's wrong with boasting about it.* He felt like complimenting the hell out of himself. Every intelligent being in the world should be complimenting the crap out of Lord Ranta.

"...Ain't that right, Zodiak?" Ranta asked, turning to the purple-blackish demon floating by his face.

Demons were servants of the Black God Skulheill, summoned by using the Dread Knight magic spell [DARK INVITATION]. A demon's appearance changed depending on the number of Vices a Dread Knight has amassed, and Ranta's demon resembled a headless human torso, with two pits in the chest area for eyes, below which was a great slit of a mouth.

{Nope, nope, nope nope nope, not at all, nope nope...} the demon hissed.

Zodiak's mouth rippled when he talked and his voice sounded like numerous children whispering as one. Until Ranta had gotten used to it, it had been quite disturbing—and even now that some time had passed, it was still enough to give him goosebumps.

"Fine. It's still better having you here than being alone..."

{Wimp, wimp, wimp... wimp imp... wimp wimp wimp... imp imp... imp imp imp imp imp...}

"Oy. You changed it to 'imp' at the end."

{Imp, imp, imp... Eeeehehehehe... imp... hehehe... imp imp imp...}

"Quit it already." Ranta raised a hand to give the demon a good smack, but as soon as he did, Zodiak floated up and out of reach.

{Eeeehehehe... ehehehe... ehehehe... imp imp imp... eeeehehehe...}

"God damn it, why? Zodiak..." Ranta hugged his knees to his chest and pretended to cry. But Zodiak failed to respond to the bait, so Ranta gave up and said instead, "Whatever. I can't believe I made it back to the fourth stratum..."

Yes, Ranta was no longer on the smithy-like fifth stratum; he had made it back to the fourth stratum, the agricultural sector. How the hell he managed to make it out of that god-awful mess... even he had no idea. He had let Mogzo go up the ladder first and then it was run, run, run for his life until he came across a different sink well by chance.

He recalled kicking down a number of kobolds as he climbed up the rope ladder, but some fifth stratum kobolds managed to follow him up regardless. Luckily, on the fourth stratum, a gate to one of the animal pens had been left open. When Ranta dove into it, the pigrats inside panicked and made a mad rush for the exit, confusing his pursuers.

It wasn't a perfect plan, but Ranta thought it was better than nothing. After that, he weaved his way in and out of pigrat and pigworm pens and threw the pursuing kobolds off his trail little by little, until the last one was out of sight. And now here he was. In a pigworm pen, surrounded by pigworms.

Just Ranta, Zodiak, and a mass of the creatures.

“Wait... what if...”

He poked one of the pigworms. No response. So then he patted it with the palm of his hand. Still nothing.

“Nice. Awesome.”

If that was the case, then... he tried giving its thick skin a sharp pinch. The pigworm glared at Ranta with black, droopy eyes that were half buried in its body and made a noise like *gufuu gufuu* at him.

“D-don't be mad...”

Gufuu! Gufuu!

“Whoa—wait, quit it already! Don't... rub yourself against my face! Eww...”

Bufuu... bufufu... gufuu!

“No, don't—lick... gross... And what the hell is up with your tongue? Feels like fricking sandpaper...”

Fuu... gufuu... fuufuu... fuu... fuu...

The pigworm started to nestle up to him. Ranta tried to shove it away, but couldn't. It was very strong. He couldn't get himself away. Suddenly, the pigworm wrapped itself around him, and when Ranta twisted and turned to throw it off, it clung on even tighter. But when he tried staying still, the pigworm calmed down with him.

“Seriously...? This thing's getting itself comfortable on me... what the hell...”

{Imp imp imp... keehehehe... imp imp imp... keehehehe... imp!}

“Quit making fun of me, Zodiak!”

{Die! Die now, die now! Be taken by Lord Skulheill! Taken taken taken!}

“Don't say scary things like that...”

{Wimp... wimp wimp wimp... eeehehehehe... imp imp imp imp imp!}

“Still imp at the end there, huh...”

He wasn't alone. He had Zodiak with him and the pigworm that had taking a liking to him... But he was very alone. Alone and with no help coming.

"This thing stinks... gross..."

It was no use trying to deny it so he might as well say it: The pigworm smelled like layered shit and piss. Being inside the pigworm pen was worse than beyond disgusting, but if he left, he risked getting caught by one of the elders on patrol. If it was a one-on-one fight against an elder, Ranta was pretty sure he could do it. He could win. He was powerful enough.

But he was fatigued, too. He didn't want to waste his strength. If he went all out, he could easily take down one, maybe two elders, but he felt like taking a break now. Even a fearless, dauntless Dread Knight needed a break once in a while.

The plan would be to rest, recover his strength, and then get moving.

"Gotta get outta here on my own..."

Mogzo. Yume. Shihoru. Mary... Haruhiro. Everyone's faces suddenly appeared in his mind's eye. No... they weren't coming. Or rather, he couldn't bring himself to believe that they'd come back for him.

Ranta gave a short, humorless laugh. "...Because I already know. You guys hate me. I've known all along."

But why? Why does everyone hate me? No one could recall their pasts, so he didn't understand the reason at all. Maybe it was because he just couldn't kiss ass and pretend to like it. It made him sick to even think about being nice to people or to be considerate of them. And to say something that he didn't think was true... he wouldn't do it even if someone threatened to pull his teeth out.

And even if he did think something was true, there were still loads of times he left his thoughts unsaid. He supposed his behavior would piss some people off. He was never unaware of that; now and then, the thought crossed his mind. There's no way it wouldn't have.

But even though he knew, he couldn't stop himself. And why did he have to try to stop? He was just being himself, after all. Going as far as being some Mr. Nice Guy, just to trick people into liking him, was out of the question. He didn't want people to like him because of a fake persona.

And he was fine with not being liked. If people wanted to hate him, then fine. Haters were going to hate. Those who understood him would accept him, or so Ranta thought. And there had to be a few people out there who understood his... his what? His value? Something like that.

People who would accept him, and give credit where credit was due, they had to be out there too. So it was fine. Those who didn't understand him can just go on not understanding. But even so, weren't they all companions? Ranta was part of the team too.

In his own way, he had been contributing to the team this entire time, and he intended to continue. He believed that, sooner or later, the others would understand that. They would come to understand Lord Ranta's value. And once they acknowledged his importance, their attitudes towards him would change.

Ranta realized that they hadn't gotten to that point yet. Not enough time had passed. Then he went and did that... the "you guys go on ahead, leave this to me" thing.

"But that's..."

Yes. Anyone would have done it, if the chance came. It was the natural course of action, for a *man*. There was no choice but to do it. A man who didn't do it couldn't be considered a man. Even if they were a girl, they might have done it. If Ranta were a girl, he knew he would probably still do it.

He just wished that... the chance had come a little later. After his companions realized just how awesome he was. It would have been so badass, if the chance to do THAT came only after they had fully and unquestionably realized how indispensable he was to the team. Haruhiro, that eediot, would have been crying his eyes out. Mogzo would have bawled. And the girls, every one of them would have fallen in love with him.

There's no way we can leave our precious Lord Ranta behind! they would say. Everyone, we have to save him! they would say. That's how things would have been for sure.

But it was too soon. The time had come too soon.

“Which means that I’m way ahead of the times...?”

Or am I wrong? Ranta thought to himself, heaving a deep sigh. But no, he couldn’t count on everyone coming. No one would be coming to save him. He had to find a way out of here on his own.

{Die! Keehehehehe! Die imp! Die die die! Keehehehehe... imp imp imp!}

The demon’s bad attitude cut Ranta right to the heart. His Dread Knight guild master had once said, “A demon is a mirror of its summoner. It resembles the Dread Knight that calls it.”

You’ve got to be fucking joking, was what Ranta wanted to scream, but his master, Cidney Agguro, was goddamn terrifying. His master wasn’t here now, but Ranta was sure that if he ever doubted his master’s words, he would still be killed on the spot. That was how scary the man was.

“Which I guess means that I still have enough left in me to be raging at him now,” Ranta muttered as a smile graced his face.

I can do this, I’ll be fine, Ranta told himself. *You’ll see, Haruhiro. I’ll make it out of here on my own. Then after you’re done being surprised, you can fall to your knees before me...*

Chapter 12: Critical Time

They had reached the third stratum and were just about to sigh in relief when an elder and two of its underlings appeared, taking them by surprise. The fight quickly turned chaotic.

Haruhiro grunted as he rapidly [SWAT], [SWAT], [SWAT]-ed and deflected Kobold A's successive attacks. There wasn't anything else he could do. This was just what happened when he fought an enemy face-to-face. And because he had to devote all this attention to the kobold's weapon and arm movements, he had no idea what was going on with everyone else.

Was everyone okay? How were they doing? He was worried but couldn't spare any further thought on it. Time. He had to buy time, even if just a little, by keeping the attention of one enemy on himself. Mogzo's current skill level should allow him to take on the elder alone. Yume wasn't afraid of a fight so she should be holding her own against Kobold B.

He also had Shihoru and Mary to back him up. If Haruhiro could keep Kobold A fully occupied, there was a good chance everything would be okay. He probably couldn't kill it on his own, but at the very least he could keep it busy.

Kobold A growled and suddenly turned its back towards him. *Shit!* By seeing the way its tail moved, Haruhiro knew he was in trouble. Kobold A spun around, swinging its sword, arm fully extended. Haruhiro realized that there was no way he could deflect a blow like that, but his body moved to execute [SWAT] out of reflex.

Whenever he was being attacked, [SWAT] just came out. He had overused the technique until it had formed a bad habit. Things turned out exactly as he'd feared.

"Argh!" Haruhiro grunted as the kobold's sword crushed through his dagger and knocked him off balance. Kobold A pressed the attack, barking furiously.

Haruhiro had no time to block, so he dodged instead. Avoiding wasted motion never even crossed his mind; instead, he put everything he had into twisting his body away. He knew that his movements were entirely inefficient and wished that he could calm down enough to fight properly. But he couldn't. He was panicked.

Haruhiro felt himself gasp as the kobold's sword bit into his left arm, just above the elbow. *It's fine... it's just a graze...* he told himself. But the amount of blood that was flowing from the wound was staggering. And it hurt. *What the hell?! Kobold, give me a break, would you? I'm asking nicely, here!* Why was he asking in the first place? Haruhiro hadn't the slightest.

Even if Haruhiro asked nicely, the kobold probably wouldn't listen. Kobold A would probably reply with, *Don't take me for an idiot.* It barked at him again and turned its back once more. It was readying the exact same attack.

Go ahead and try! Haruhiro thought now. He saw right through it this time. After seeing the technique performed once already, there was nothing to be afraid of anymore. Haruhiro leapt back, putting between enough distance that the kobold's attack couldn't reach him. Or so he thought. But the kobold suddenly performed a back flip, coming right towards him.

"What the—!" Haruhiro stared wide eyed in surprise.

Rather than attack with its weapon, Kobold A kicked him square in the chest, sending him flying. He landed on his behind, hard, with the kobold still coming straight at him. *Shit!* He was done for.

“[LIGHT OF JUDGEMENT]!”

A beam of blinding light shot towards Kobold A. Mary’s spell. The kobold hurriedly leaned backwards hard to dodge it. As Haruhiro got back up to his feet, Mary slipped in, graceful and smooth. She brought her staff up and around in a wide arc.

“[SMASH]!”

Mary’s weapon connected crushingly with the kobold’s side. It was a brilliant, gorgeous combination of the [LIGHT OF JUDGEMENT] and [SMASH] skills. *Can’t just stand around and admire it though!* Haruhiro thought. Kobold A swayed on its feet. Haruhiro deftly went behind it, closed the distance between them, and, using [WIDOW MAKER], he rammed his dagger under its chin.

As he quickly jumped away, his eyes met Mary’s for the briefest of seconds. “Thanks!” he said, before turning his attention to the scene around him.

Mogzo was dominating his fight with the elder foreman, but Yume was struggling against the remaining worker kobold and appeared to be hurt, too. She needed help immediately. Shihoru cast [SHADOW BIND] on the elder, stopping its movements and allowing Mogzo an all-out offensive to finish it off. After that, everyone fell in on Kobold B and killed it easily.

Things quieted down afterward and they were finally able to catch a break. They hurriedly collected the talismans from the kobolds’ bodies and had Mary heal them.

“Seems like we managed, even without Ranta,” Yume said with a slight smile, though exhaustion was evident in her expression.

Like Haruhiro, she had also been injured in the previous fight. To him, it seemed “managed” was less accurate to say than “they made it out by the skin of their teeth”.

“But... it was a close call, I think,” Shihoru said, gaze on the ground. “Maybe... Yume, Haruhiro, you two just aren’t good at fighting in the front lines. Ah... but it’s not like I’m trying to criticize you or anything...”

“I know,” Haruhiro smiling at Shihoru, though his grin came across more bitterly than he intended. “I agree. Me and Yume just aren’t suited to take on enemies directly in fights, no matter how much we try. For me, at least, when things go badly I get manipulated by my opponents. And if things are going well, it’s because I’m barely managing to *avoid* that. Or that’s the way it feels to me. And because of that, there’s too much motion, the fights turn messy, and it makes things tougher for you and Mary. I think it makes it hard to keep track of everything that’s going on.”

“But it’s not as if Ranta stays in one place all the time either,” Mary pointed out.

Though Mary probably intended to support Haruhiro’s argument with that statement, something made Haruhiro tilt his head to one side in uncertainty.

“Yeah, that’s true. But I think Ranta intentionally tries to keep one enemy’s attention completely on himself during a fight. When we offered to help him before, he would always get pissed at us. Sure, that’s stupid sometimes, but if we just let him do it, he does keep one enemy off our backs. I just realized how much of a difference that makes. And he’s also...”

Haruhiro didn’t want to admit it, but it would be unfair of him not to. And it was the truth, so he felt obligated.

He took a deep breath and said, “The reality is he’s also gotten much stronger. He’s way better in fights than before. I don’t know, maybe it’s because he uses his skills so much, but he’s become pretty good at combining his techniques with ours. Without a doubt, he’s become a real asset.”

Maybe even more of an asset than me, Haruhiro thought and was about to say it too, but stopped himself short. There wasn't any point in belittling himself now.

"M-maybe we should go—" Mogzo started, then fell silent.

"Everyone knows Yume hates Ranta," Yume said, one side of her cheek puffed out and gaze glued to the ceiling. "Whenever Ranta calls Yume flat-chested, it hurts Yume's feelin's 'n no matter how much Yume hollers at him to knock it off, he doesn't. So even if people tell Yume there's reasons to like a person like that, Yume can't do it."

"Yeah," Haruhiro nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"But even so," Yume's gaze fell to the floor and puffed both her cheeks out. "But even though Yume hates Ranta's guts, the team is havin' a hard time without him. Even though he's just one person. When Yume thinks about what it must be like for Ranta... he's lost Haruhiro, Mogzo, Shihoru, Mary, Yume... all five of us. Imagine how tough it must be on him to lose all of us at once."

"Yume..." Shihoru whispered, hugging her around the shoulders.

"When Yume thinks about it..." Yume seemed close to tears. "If it were Yume in that situation, all alone in this dang place, Yume would be so lonely and disheartened that she wouldn't be able to do anything at all. What's it like for Ranta, Yume wonders..."

"First of all, he..." Haruhiro began to say, then clamped his mouth shut, and took a deep breath through his nose.

It completely and utterly sucked to have to think seriously now. It felt as if he was hanging off a ledge on Mt. Crazy, but he had to somehow make a cool-headed, logical decision. Could he do it? Could he rise to the occasion?

To be honest, he wouldn't know until he tried. And even if he tried, maybe he still wouldn't know. Was he cool and calm right now? How would he even know if he was? By asking someone else, maybe? Turn to the others and ask: *Hey guys, do I look calm and collected to you?* What the hell, no way.

Everyone was looking at him, waiting to hear what he had to say next. Everyone was looking to him for a decision. He had no choice but to make the judgment call.

"We can't be sure whether or not Ranta's still alive," Haruhiro said. "But I want to believe that he is. And I want to move on the assumption that he is. If we don't believe, then there's no point in doing anything. Yes, Ranta's still alive. And if he's still alive, I want to go after him."

He couldn't force anyone else to make the decision nor could he just toss everything aside and run away from the responsibility either. That was the reality of it.

"We'll head down to the fourth stratum first, then see if we can make it back to the fifth. But I don't want to take any risks. Ranta stayed to give us the chance to get away. We'd be ignoring everything he was trying to do for us if we got ourselves killed trying to save him."

I'm such a horrible person, Haruhiro couldn't help but think. He didn't say anything out loud, but if it was any one of his companions other than Ranta, he probably would have made this same decision, but with reversed priorities and less caution. *Ranta... maybe it's because it's you, I was able to avoid making that sort of rash decision.*

"Our own safety will be our top priority. We're not going to force ourselves and if things look too dangerous, we'll turn back and head towards the surface. If that's what happens, we can figure out our next move afterwards. Anyone against my proposal?"

He didn't believe in the slightest that anyone would raise their hand. And no one did.

But Haruhiro was the one who made the decision; everyone else merely agreed. He would have thought that the weight of the responsibility, the heaviness of the all the fear and doubt suddenly laid onto his shoulders, would have crippled him; yet that wasn't the case at all. For some reason, he felt oddly relieved.

The decision to go had been made. Now all they had to do was do it. And they might even have a chance of pulling it off.

"Alright," Haruhiro said. "Let's go. Ranta's waiting for us."

Chapter 13: Combo

He couldn't stay in the pigworm pen forever... one of the pigworms had fallen in love with him, and it grossed him out.

"Look, I just don't think this relationship is going to work," Ranta told the pigworm that had attached itself to him. "I'm sorry... Actually, no. I'm not frickin' sorry at all—Hey! Quit following me! Quit it or I'll roast you up and eat you whole!"

He was protesting in vain however, as the pigworm *buu-hee buu-buu*-ed at him and attempted to snuggle even closer.

"Stupid love-struck pigworm! See ya!" Ranta shook off the pigworm and jumped over the fence.

The only creature who followed now was his demon, Zodiak.

{Wimp imp! Heeheehehe... imp imp imp! Keeheehehe... imp imp imp imp!}

"Shut it, Zodiak!"

{YOU shut it! Hehehehe... FOREVER shut it!}

"You telling me to die?! Is that what you're saying!?"

{Keeheehehe...}

"You take that back right now!"

But no, hold on a second... Before Ranta could complete the thought, Zodiak suddenly drew near, put its rippling mouth close to Ranta's ear and whispered, *{It's here... it's here... hehehe... the one who has come to silence you... it's here...}*

"What!?"

Panicked, Ranta hurriedly looked around him. There it was: an elder kobold, one of those foremen who carried an iron-tipped whip and barbed wire. Luckily, it wasn't looking in Ranta's direction, but it was definitely coming his way. He hesitated for a brief second before jumping back into the pen with the pigworm he'd just rejected.

In the pigworm pen he wouldn't be noticed by any nearby kobolds. There was another pigworm pen close by, but earlier he and the others had thrown the elder they killed into that one. After witnessing them greedily devouring the body, Ranta decided to refrain from entering that particular pen. Getting eaten was not preferred.

He was immediately jumped by a pigworm—no, not exactly "jumped"; one of the pigworms just sort of sidled up and wrapped itself around him. Soon, another one did the same and now he had not one but two pigworms that were into him. They licked his face so enthusiastically with their sandpaper tongues that it hurt. He might actually be bleeding, it hurt so much.

Shit... "Guess I'm irresistible," he said to himself.

{Irrrrresistable! Irrrrresistable! Heeheehe... irrrrrresistable... keeheehe... irrrrrresistable!}

“Zodiak, you bastard...” Ranta swore from the bottom of his heart that one of these days, he was going to beat the crap out of that little shit.

But not right now. Zodiak wasn't like the pigworms who had snuggled up to Ranta, but he wasn't a Dread Knight's demon best friend either. A demon's special abilities depended on the number of Vices its Dread Knight amassed.

Zero to ten Vices was rank one and the demon would give a warning when enemies were near. If it felt like it. Eleven to forty was rank two and the demon would distract enemies by whispering things in their ears. If it felt like it. Rank three was after have collected forty-one or more Vices, the demon would trip up enemies or otherwise obstruct their movement. But only if it felt like it, of course.

However, the above only applied after sunset, when Luminous' power waned; the god of Light and Lord Skulheill's born enemy. At rank one, Dread Knights couldn't even summon their demons during the daytime. And at levels above the second rank, the effectiveness of a demon during daylight hours was always one rank lower than its current rank.

Ranta was currently rank three and even though it was hard to tell time within the mines, he guessed that it wasn't evening yet because Zodiak performed rank two abilities... if Zodiak felt like it.

“My master told me that the more Vices I collect,” he muttered. “My demon would become stronger, become more obedient but...”

{Really? Is that really true? Keehehehe... did he really say that? Heehehehe...}

“Yeah, he did.”

{You got tricked! Tricked! Keehehehe... tricked tricked tricked! Heehehehe...}

“Quit saying stuff like that. It'll jinx me.”

{Jinx! Jinx! Jinx! Eeehehehehe... you'll be biting the dust today! Heehehehe...}

“Fuck you, Zodiak. This is why I don't like summoning you.”

That said, there were times—like when Zodiak warned him about the elder earlier—that the demon was helpful. And... because being all alone down here made him feel almost a tiny little bit lonely.

No no no, Ranta shook his head. “I'm *not* lonely. Fuck that. No way. I don't even know the meaning of the word.”

{Liar! Liar liar liar! Keehehehe... big fat liar! Hehehe... hehe... dirty liar!}

“I'm not big or fat or dirty or a liar!”

He couldn't help getting pissed off at the demon, but thanks to Zodiak being around, at least there was never a dull moment. Ranta nodded to convince himself.

“That's clearly a huge constituent of things. Constituent. Man, I know some pretty damn cool words. Not ‘factor’, CONSTITUENT. Goddamn it sounds so awesome because I'm the one saying it. So that means that I'm goddamn awesome too. Got it, Zodiak? Consti—... Zodiak! Oy! Zodiak, say something insulting back!”

{...}

“Hey, why aren't you saying anything now? Say something!”

{.....}

“Zodiak! Oy! Zodiak!”

{.....}

“Zoooodiak! ...Zodiak?”

{.....}

“Wha—what’s going on? Zodiak, what’s wrong? What happened? Are you okay?”

{.....}

“Z-Zodiak?!”

{Aahahahaha... tricked you! Keehehehe... triiiiiiiiiicked youuuuuuuu!}

“Bastard!”

Ranta attempted to punch the demon as chastisement, but missed completely as Zodiak bounded away and out of reach.

{You don’t know how to hit a demon... even though you’re a stupid Dread Knight... Keehehehehe...}

“I-idiot! ‘Course I can! But you’re my demon, right? What kind of person would I be, hitting my own demon?!”

{Really? Really? Hehe! Do you reeeeeeeally mean it?}

“Of course! Would I say it if I weren’t serious?”

{...Fuck you a hundred million times!}

“What?!”

{Keehehehehe... Heehehe... Keehehehehe... Hehe... Keehehehehe...}

Damn it. This was turning into something resembling a goddamn soap opera lover’s quarrel. It was kind of fun earlier, but not anymore.

“...Can’t just hide. It’s not like me. But I don’t see any other choice... maybe?”

But even if he did remain here, he didn’t think help was going to come. *They’re not coming. No way they’ll come...* No, there wasn’t any reason to expect anyone to come. *Why am I even hoping they would? Pathetic. Am I a man or what?*

“If I see the others again, I’ll deal with it then,” Ranta told himself as he decided to gamble on leaving the pen. Being on the move was more like him. It made him feel better.

He shoved all his attached pigworms aside and leaped out of the pen. There was still a long way to go before he could completely make an escape, so he scurried along the paths between pens rather than running at full speed.

“Easy. Piece of cake.”

The areas in and around the darkshroom, ogrefern, and glow blossom fields were dangerous; they were completely exposed and many kobold workers milled about. But only the occasional elder and maybe a regular kobold or two patrolled around the pigworm and pigrat pens so it was definitely safer around here. The fences around the pens were also high, so if Ranta bent low, he could remain unseen. But maybe he was being a little too careful.

“At this rate, I can probably jump around with no problems...” he chuckled.

Growing bolder, Ranta jumped between two pens and suddenly collided with a worker kobold as he landed. The kobold yelped and Ranta was about to shout, too, before realizing there was no time for talk. He moved to engage all out, but it didn't look like he had time to even draw his longsword.

What was he going to do...?

Inspiration suddenly struck. He had seen Haruhiro use a new skill recently, [WIDOW MAKER], probably it was called. Maybe he could use that. Ranta had no idea how the skill was actually executed, but he'd seen it enough that if he just copied Haruhiro, things would somehow work out.

“Hey! Quit moving around!” Ranta demanded as he moved in to lock down the kobold's arms.

Naturally, the kobold fought back and it was goddamn strong too. But Ranta was also desperate to win. He pinned both the kobold's arms down with his own, and attempted to wrap his own leg around the kobold's, but it didn't work out the way he imagined. They went down together in a mess of tangled limbs.

As they both rolled around on the floor, Ranta hit his head several times. The thing also elbowed him repeatedly in the ribs and it hurt far more than he thought it would. This [WIDOW MAKER] skill looked easy, but it really wasn't. Even though he temporarily held down the kobold's arms, it didn't look like he could do anything more.

“Gotta... strangle it!”

He let the kobold's arms go for now, wrapped both hands around its throat instead, and applied pressure like mad. As the kobold started to suffocate, it thrashed around even more wildly than before, trying to throw Ranta off. Ranta yelled, holding on with all his strength.

The kobold swiped and clawed at his face, stuck its fingers into his mouth and tore the corner of his lip open.

“ARGH!!!” Ranta bit down on the kobold's fingers in response and clasped down on its neck even harder.

Then finally, *finally* the worker kobold's body went limp.

“Did I—?! No, not yet!”

He refused to believe it was dead and kept his strangle hold on it for a good five, ten seconds more, never taking the pressure off its throat. *It's okay now...*

He checked to see if the kobold was still breathing. It wasn't. It was dead. Ranta shoved himself away from the kobold's body and started to get back onto his feet, but couldn't. All his strength felt drained from his body. Zodiak bounced and floated around Ranta and looked down at him from above.

{Keehehehe... what're you doing? Rookie! Rookie rookie cookie! Hehehehe....}

“Cookie? What the hell...?”

That was a really close fight though. Too close for comfort... or was it? *Nah, not dangerous at all...* He was flawlessly, perfectly fine.

“Yeah, let’s just leave it at that...”

Ranta rolled onto all fours and pushed himself back up onto his feet. How to dispose of the body? Before that, he retrieved its talisman. The acquisition of loot made him feel a little better as he shoved the body into a pigrat pen with a grunt of effort.

“Done!”

The sound of barking filled the air. A kobold. No, not just one, a good number of kobolds were rushing towards him from a bit of a distance away.

{Man up, Dread Knight! Eeehehehe... Fight fight fight! Keehehehe...}

“No frickin’ way! I can’t take on all of them!”

{Wimp imp! Imp imp imp! Eeehehehe...}

“Fuck you, Zodiak!”

Ranta turned on his heels and ran, his body like lead. Maybe the heaviness of his body was just his imagination, but his torn lip sure hurt. A lot. How badly had the kobold torn it? Shit. He was going to be called Cleft Lip Boy for the rest of his life now. It’ll spoil his killer looks.

Not the time to be thinking about that! his inner voice told him.

When Ranta turned back to look behind him, he saw at the kobolds had nearly caught up to him. Of course he wanted to say something smartass-y, but he’d had enough of Zodiak’s jeers. In his current state, he didn’t know whether he could take more of the demon’s acerbic responses.

Wordlessly and without looking back, he ran for all he was worth.

Chapter 14: That Boy

“Looks like there’s some sort of commotion going on over there,” Haruhiro said, pointing into the distance. The others turned their heads.

“Hmm...” Yume placed both hands, shaped into binoculars, in front of her eyes. “I can’t see too well ’cause of the fences, but it looks somebody’s head is bobbin’ up and down over there...”

“You can also hear them howling,” Mary added, straining her ears. “They sound numerous.”

“Maybe...” Shihoru said, her grip tightening on her staff, “it’s because of...”

Mogzo nodded. “R-Ranta...?”

Haruhiro and the others were now on the agricultural fourth stratum, having descended from the third. They had been approaching a sink well to the fifth when Haruhiro noticed the unusual amount of activity.

“You mean he managed to somehow get back up here from the fifth stratum all alone?” Haruhiro wondered.

Too rare to die, Haruhiro thought, and though he didn’t really consider it the greatest achievement in the world, it was still pretty impressive. At the very least, Ranta’s ability to survive surpassed that of any normal person. It was perseverance of an intensity that Haruhiro and the others just didn’t possess.

They exchanged glances with one another. Haruhiro said, “Let’s go!”

Everyone headed towards the uproar of kobolds. They took care to advance cautiously, never rushing; there was no point in doing any of this if they got caught and chased around too. However, entering an area with so many kobolds in frenzy seemed nigh impossible.

Haruhiro made everyone fall back while he approached the end of a creature pen and poked his head slightly out for a look.

“Whoa...”

The kobolds were rampaging like a swarm of ants on fire, running around crazily; here, then there, then back again. Sometimes they would even hop the fences into one of the pens then jump back out, all while barking like rabid dogs. Haruhiro observed the kobolds for some time since luckily, none of them were looking in his direction.

He finally withdrew and said to the others, “...there’s no way we can even get close.”

No other conclusion was possible. If they went any further the kobolds would find them for sure. Of course, one option was to let themselves be discovered, and then try to lure the kobolds away from the area to give Ranta a chance to run or hide. But there was no guarantee that they would be able to draw all of the kobolds to them. Besides, it also occurred to Haruhiro that, compared to any of the five of them, Ranta might have an unexpectedly easier time running, hiding, and adapting to the circumstances in general.

And even if the five of them allowed themselves to be chased, there was no guarantee they would all be able to get away safely. In fact, maybe it was better to just assume the worst and rid himself of unwarranted optimism. No, it was better to remain undetected, but on the other hand, Haruhiro couldn’t think of any other way to help Ranta.

Priorities. What was the order of priorities here? *What's the most important thing I have to do now? What comes after?* The first was... the well-being of the five of them. Rescuing Ranta came second. Getting the order of these two priorities reversed was not an option. It was simply unacceptable.

If it was Yume or Shihoru or Mogzo or even Mary in Ranta's place, the order of priorities wouldn't change. Haruhiro couldn't allow himself that, even if it hadn't been Ranta. That's what being a leader meant.

"Let's get out of here," Haruhiro said with a firm nod. "No doubt Ranta's nearby, but if the kobolds find us here too, they're going to go even more insane and the situation's just going to get worse. Kobolds don't seem all that persistent to me; if we let things be, maybe they'll give up and go away. They've got their own work to do too. I think eventually things will quiet down. We'll keep searching for Ranta then."

"But... what if Ranta..." Shihoru started hesitantly. "What if, before we come back... they find him and—I'm sorry... I—"

"If that happens..." Yume bit her lip hard, frowning. "If that happens, we'll be searchin' for his body... or what's left of it..."

"Yume's right," Mary said, her face stark white.

Mogzo exhaled long and deep.

"I have to make these sorts of decisions." Haruhiro clenched his fists tightly. "Whatever happens, the responsibility is on me alone."

"Nuh uh!" Yume protested, shaking her head vigorously. "It's not just yours, Haru... it's everyone's, and..."

"No," Haruhiro said firmly, glad his voice did not emerge trembling.

He didn't want to allow anyone to see his pathetic, weakling side, especially at a moment like this. Any other time was fine, but not at a time like this. Not now.

Haruhiro continued, "If everyone agrees to do what I say, then I'll take all the responsibility. I don't know if I'm saying this right, but... we can't just keep depending on each other to keep ourselves propped up. I think every party needs something; someone like a backbone, like a central pillar to support it." He shook his head. "No. I know it for sure. The problem is whether or not I have what it takes to be one... I don't know, but I want to try. I'll do my best. Please let me try."

Yume suddenly slapped him on the back. "Now that's bein' a boy, Haru."

"Err... but I've always been one. A boy."

"Heck, Yume didn't mean it that way," Yume said. "Uhh... Yume meant... Yume meant... Yume doesn't know what Yume meant, but it did feel like you were one."

Haruhiro felt his chest tighten all of a sudden. "Err... Thanks? I think..."

His emotional well-being was threatened, being told that by a girl... what she said could definitely have other connotations. For now though, Haruhiro took it as Yume's approval of his leadership.

"Haruhiro," Shihoru had her head bowed for some reason. "Thanks... and thanks for everything later, too."

"Thanks, Shihoru," Haruhiro replied. "Wait, why are you thanking me?"

"It just felt right," Shihoru said.

“I see.”

Mogzo too, flashed him a thumbs up and for a moment, Haruhiro was lost on how to respond. He finally returned it with a thumbs up of his own. Mary said nothing, but offered an open hand to him instead. Flustered, Haruhiro got his hand caught on his own cloak and it took him a moment before he could free it to shake Mary’s hand... which he found to be silky soft.

Wow. I’m riding this like a real idiot, Haruhiro thought.

Haruhiro looked again towards where Ranta probably was. There was no change in the kobold’s level of activity so charging in now would be like committing suicide.

“Let’s retreat as far as we can while still being able to keep an eye on this place,” Haruhiro said. He turned back towards the others and added, “Ranta’s fine. If this was all it took to kill him, then he would have been dead long before now.”

Of course it was all empty, obligatory reassurances. Everyone already knew that, but his companions all answered him with nods anyway, for which Haruhiro was very grateful.

It would be indeed shitty if you came back to haunt us as a ghost, Haruhiro thought.

As they left the area Haruhiro whispered in the back of his mind, *So don’t die, Ranta.*

Chapter 15: The Rising-Falling Dread Knight

Groaning in pain, Ranta hugged his longsword against himself with his right arm and simultaneously pressed down on his injured left arm.

“Owww...” The word escaped his lips as he attempted to flex his left hand. *No!* He needed to stay absolutely silent.

He was hidden, as usual, in a pigworm pen... more precisely, he was actually hidden in a mass of pigworms. More precisely still, the pigworms were hiding him. They were all gathered in a corner of one of the pens, Ranta right in the middle of them, trying to keep his breathing quiet. He was alone. Completely and utterly alone.

Even Zodiak was no longer with him, as the time limit of the Dread Knight spell [DARK INVITATION] had run out. Demons could only be summoned for thirty minutes before they returned to their places at foot of Lord Skulheill and Ranta didn't have the mental strength left to summon it again. The demon's taunts had really left him dejected.

Even someone as awesome as Lord Ranta would be beyond dead tired after making such a graceful and elegant escape from what seemed, to him at least, to be a million and four kobolds. He was injured all over too; the wound on his left arm so deep that he could no longer move the limb. It was also hurting so badly that Ranta could no longer feel pain from any of his other numerous injuries. He didn't even want to look at those or think about how much blood he must have lost.

His entire arm was pounding and, with each throb, blood left him in a steady stream. He didn't realize that he had started to pant in shallow gasps.

“I’m gonna cry ~★...” he said to himself in the cutest sounding tone he could manage, but even that failed to bring him a single quantum of solace.

Hot girls. Dancing naked. *POR FAVOR*. He wanted super-hot girls dancing naked for him. No, no... entirely naked wasn't good. It would be better if they were somewhat clothed. Maybe wearing only panties or something. Mmm... Mary. Nah, Mary was so beautiful his imagination couldn't generate anything appropriate. No, if anyone it had to be Shihoru. Because her boobs were humongous. Yes. Gigantic. Yume wasn't bad either. Her boobs weren't enormous but that's okay. Her plain looks were more his type, anyway. Yes.

Hmm... but somehow, he wasn't satisfied. It was all... too real. They were his companions and they were always together day in and day out. *Were*. Not anymore. Thinking about it that way depressed him a little.

But whatever, it's fine... They weren't coming. Of course they weren't. Naturally they weren't. There was no reason for them to, and he wasn't expecting it either... right? He had to make it out of here on his own. Could he do it?

He had been highly confident about being able to make it a little while ago. He never doubted that he could. At the very least, he made himself believe it. But now... he didn't know. His arm was hurting. It hurt so badly. At this rate, he wouldn't be able to use it at all. And it wasn't just that. Running or any sort of physical exertion sent waves of pain into the wound, causing him to groan out loud and grow lightheaded.

All attempts to block out the pain also failed.

Can't do this. Can't go any further than this. There's no way out of here for me... NO! Ranta wanted to rid himself of those weakling thoughts. Rather than on the things he couldn't do, he would focus just on the things he *could*.

Why had things turned out like this? Because he wanted to look cool. You first, he'd said to Mogzo. He wished he hadn't now. He really did. Why did he go and do something like that? Maybe because he wanted to try it just once? Because it was a cool phrase he wanted to use just once? Was that really why?

No. That wasn't it.

I just wanted to be accepted. Doing something self-sacrificing, or some phrase like that, would have made the others think he was awesome. Yeah, there was a little of that too. *I'm me. Others are others. I don't give a shit what others think of me,* that was a lie.

Of course he wanted others to think well of him if possible. He wanted to be liked. He wanted others to care about him. And it wasn't like he didn't know how to get others to like him. *It's definitely by doing that. Right?* Acting like a good guy. Doing stuff for everyone's sake, being considerate of people and all. Even saying the right things at the right time if he was smart enough.

Heh. That was Manato. Not me. Ranta wasn't Manato and couldn't get near Manato either. And it was too late to start trying. No one thought well of him, no one liked him. And certainly no one cared about him.



But he was happy about *that* at least. The, “Mogzo, you first,” thing. If the others had been able to get away because of that, then maybe they were grateful to him. Maybe they would have said, “Thank you, Ranta, you saved us.” Man, in that moment back there, he was so damn cool.

That’s enough. Here at the end, it was nice to think about just the good things. Ranta had saved his companions and now he was going to die down here.

“Will you guys think about me once in a while?” Ranta whispered and as he did, the pigworms surrounding him started squealing and vigorously cuddling up to his face.

“Hey! No! I didn’t mean you guys! I meant my team, not you freaks!”

Just when he had worked himself into a sentimental mood, the pigworms had to ruin everything. Maybe that was a good thing though. But if he was going to die here, he really didn’t want to die by getting cuddled to death by pigworms. He wanted to die in a cooler way. Like going out fighting.

“Yeah.”

He shoved the pigworms aside and jumped over the fence out of the pen. A little while earlier—he wasn’t sure how much earlier, but the area had been full of kobolds, and was not anymore. It was completely quiet now.

“...did they give up?”

Cowards, Ranta grinned broadly. Maybe he would make it out of here after all. He tried giving his longsword a swing with only his right hand and though the motion caused his left arm a pang, the pain was bearable.

“No way I’m gonna die that easily, now that I think about it...”

A thought occurred to him as he strolled along, humming a tune. *Did they really abandon me down here?* Yeah, his team was all weaklings, but in principle, not bad people. They may have hated him, but they were all comrades and comrades wouldn’t abandon each other lightly, would they? Ranta had a feeling that real companions just didn’t do that to each other no matter how much they wanted to.

Maybe, just maybe, they were looking for him after all. It wasn’t out of the question.

“I hope you guys aren’t still down here though...” Ranta sighed. *Because you guys are weaklings. It’s not like you to risk your lives for me. Doing stuff like that’s more for a manly man like me.*

If one of the others ended up dying because they came back to look for him...

“Not frickin’ funny.” Chills went down Ranta’s spine just thinking about it. He shook himself off. *No way. No goddamn way.* He didn’t want to be indebted to them like that. *No way. Stop that shit.* If his voice could reach the others at the faraway place they probably were now, he would have told them not to think about him and just get themselves out of the mines quick as possible. Maybe not all the way back to Altana, but to wait near the exit somewhere.

“Ugh.” Ranta grunted as a sharp pain shot up his injured arm when he leaned against a fence rail. It was fine though. He was fine.

A pair of kobolds appeared from a turn up ahead. They weren’t looking his way now but it was just a matter of time before they did. He had no choice but to take the initiative first. Decision made, Ranta picked up his pace. He couldn’t really run because of his injured arm, so he slid his feet along the ground and approached the kobolds.

They turned towards him and in that moment, Ranta leapt in, using [ANGER THRUST]. But it wasn't just the same old [ANGER THRUST] he always used. It was [ANGER THRUST] version two: [SILENT ANGER THRUST]. Ranta's longsword pierced the target kobold's throat perfectly center. It flailed about, but severed vocal chords prevented it from making a single sound.

Ranta swung his longsword low next, sweeping the other kobold's feet out from under it. As it fell over, he stomped his foot hard into its head, instantly rendering it motionless. He crouched down, his arm hurting almost unbearably. The more he was determined to bear it down, however, the less intense the pain seemed to become.

After he finished collecting the talismans from the bodies, he nodded forcefully to himself.

"I'll kill them all, one at a time."

Chapter 16: Resolution and a Wish

Haruhiro noticed how things had calmed down. His ears, rather than his eyes, told him.

He and the others had hidden themselves inside a pen occupied by neither pigrats nor pigworms. They were a fair distance from where they thought Ranta was, but before, the clamor the kobolds had made around Ranta had been obvious. Not anymore.

Either the kobolds had caught Ranta or he had gotten away. Which was it?

In the latter case, he could possibly even be up to the third stratum by now... such a possibility now occurred to Haruhiro, and the fact that he failed to consider it earlier greatly unsettled him. Someone smarter would have been able to imagine the possible scenarios and pick out the most probable. Unfortunately, Haruhiro didn't think himself endowed with such intelligence. He could only do the best he could with what he had.

Let's get a move on. We need to find him, he thought, and was about to say it out loud too, but clamped his mouth shut.

"It's okay, Haru." Mary put a hand on his shoulder. "Just do things your own way."

"That's right!" Yume said, patting him on the head. "Be you 'cause you're you!"

Haruhiro had no idea what she was saying but that was probably because what she said didn't really mean anything anyway and wow, being petted by her sure felt so embarrassingly good, so whatever.

With a grunt, Mogzo got to his feet. Shihoru took several deep breaths. They moved out, heading towards where they thought Ranta was. Haruhiro had been right: Few kobolds remained in the area now—and what he meant by few was absolutely zero. Not even one. It was almost too quiet.

As they walked from creature pen to creature pen, Haruhiro started to get a really bad feeling about this. It shouldn't be this quiet, whatever the situation. Maybe... Ranta had been caught after all.

Ranta! Haruhiro wanted to try calling his name. But he didn't. It would just feel weird. That wasn't all though; saying anything in a loud voice probably wasn't a good idea. Looking at the others' expressions, Haruhiro got a good idea of what they might have been thinking. No one was imagining anything good, that's for sure.

"We can't be certain yet," Haruhiro whispered, realizing only afterwards that the way he said it hardly inspired confidence.

He should have said something like "Ranta's definitely fine" instead of something so apparently half-assed. *Do it your way*, they had told him, and while it made him really happy that his companions were so supportive, he also knew that his shortcomings needed work. But real human beings didn't change with a flip of a switch.

A long howl split the air.

Mary halted in her tracks. "Was that...?"

"Did we get spotted?" Yume glanced around hurriedly.

"No," said Shihoru wide-eyed and shaking her head slightly. "Not us."

“Then... Ranta?” Mogzo drew his sword and assumed a defensive stance.

But where? To their left. The kobold that originally howled had fallen silent, but other howls followed from that direction. It didn’t seem like there were that many of them though. Or so Haruhiro guessed. The noise was much more subdued than before.

What to do?

“Let’s go!” Haruhiro broke into a run.

Was this the right decision? He might be leading all of them into a really dangerous situation... What if his guess was wrong? If it looked bad, then they could just turn back. Right. Yes. It wasn’t like they were at the point of no return. Or so he told himself. But why did he always tell himself these kinds of back doors? His own indecisiveness irritated him. He wanted to be a confident leader, but maybe it just wasn’t in him.

If he really couldn’t do that, then what he *could* do was at least project an image of confidence. Just fake it. He’d come off cool and masculine, and everyone else would feel less uneasy to boot.

There they were; three or four—no, make that five worker kobolds and one elder chasing a lone human at a run. There weren’t that many of them, but they had their target surrounded. The human was armored and swinging a longsword in wide arcs with his right hand in an attempt to keep the kobolds at bay. He was not succeeding. The human leapt straight back to put distance between him and his attackers but the kobolds closed the gap easily.

“Ranta!” Haruhiro cried.

When Ranta looked, the expression on his face was like someone who had seen a ghost.

That’s what I should say, Haruhiro thought, which was the wrong phrase, since Ranta hadn’t actually said anything. What was the expression for that then? Not “say” maybe... wait. Now wasn’t exactly the time to be thinking about that.

Shocked at everyone’s appearance, Ranta halted in his tracks, just as a worker kobold leapt at him.

“Argh!” Ranta grunted as the kobold brought him to the ground.

“We’re coming!” Haruhiro shouted.

The other four kobolds remained focused on Ranta and his kobold, not paying any attention to Haruhiro and the others. This might actually work.

“Everyone, attack as one!” Haruhiro ordered and just as the words came out of his mouth, the **line** appeared.

The hazy, indistinct line of light ran from the tip of Haruhiro’s dagger to one of the kobold workers then curved around to end at the back of the elder foreman. *Whoa, that’s a pretty long...* Haruhiro mused inwardly.

He didn’t have to think; his body moved on its own, as if it was being controlled by some unseen passenger. First he stabbed his dagger into the worker kobold’s back, and next the elder. Haruhiro couldn’t describe how it felt as his blade pierced both kobolds in fatal spots. It was like a sudden tightening in his chest and instant awareness that the kobolds were dead.

At the same time that Haruhiro’s targets went down, Mogzo finished another with his signature [RAGE CLEAVE]. Mary struck a worker with her staff and Shihoru followed up with [SHADOW ECHO]. Yume pressed the attack with [SWEEPING SLASH] and [CROSS CUT] in tandem. Mogzo then finished it, using [RAGE CLEAVE] once again.

“Damn it!” Ranta yelled, as he was forced back by a kobold’s attacks.

Haruhiro didn’t respond, but rather drew himself near the kobold’s backside. He grabbed it from behind, pulled it to the ground, and thrust his dagger into its throat; the [WIDOW MAKER] technique.

“I’ll heal you,” Mary said, helping Ranta to his feet then casting a light magic healing spell immediately.

Ranta glared at Haruhiro sidelong, shoulders heaving. “Don’t suddenly shout my name like that! You almost got me killed from surprise, idiot!”

Despite his bravado Ranta looked worse for wear. Mary was concentrating her efforts to heal a particularly deep-looking wound on his left arm, but his face was torn up too. It was hard for Haruhiro to get angry, seeing Ranta in that condition.

“Sorry,” he replied sincerely. Ranta looked away.

“Heeey...” Yume sauntered to the other side to get a better look at Ranta’s face. Her eyes widened in surprise. “Ranta... are you crying?”

“No, I’m not!” Ranta spat vehemently.

“But you’re all teary-eyed...”

“That’s ’cause it hurts all over!” Ranta insisted.

“No need to act like someone hogtied you by your underpants...” Yume said. “You’re alive and we’re all able to see each other again.”

“I really hoped I would! No! I mean—” Ranta quickly amended, flustered. “I mean, I didn’t mean I wanted to see you guys again! I meant I thought I’d never see your faces again and my chest got all... my chest got...”

“Got what?” Yume pressed. “Got all tight like your heart was breaking?”

“S-shut up!” Ranta shot back. “I don’t want to hear it from someone with a washboard for a chest!”

“Don’t call Yume a washboard!” Yume cried.

“I’ll call you whatever I want! If I want to call you a washboard a gazillion times, I will! Washboard! Washboard! Washboard! Washboard!”

“Stay still,” Mary commanded, grabbing Ranta under the chin. “And be quiet. Or would you rather not get healed?”

Mary’s face was expressionless, her tone flat—and it only made her all the more intimidating.

“U-uh, n-no...” Ranta sat up ramrod straight. “Sorry.”

“Now you’ve made her mad...” Yume taunted, invoking a glare from Ranta but nothing more. Ranta was deathly afraid of Mary, and he remained absolutely still.

“I’m... so glad,” Shihoru said, sinking to the floor.

Mogzo heaved a heavy sigh. “Me too.”

We can't let our guard down yet, Haruhiro thought. *Not at a time like this...* They had to stay alert in this situation. Their worst enemy would be any mistakes they made when they let their guard down. Haruhiro swept his eyes around the area. There! He was right; two, maybe three kobolds, leaping out of a pen in the distance. If that was all of them, the team would be able to clean them up without a problem, but there was no guarantee more wouldn't come.

"Mary, how's Ranta?" Haruhiro asked.

"He'll be fine," she said.

"Okay, we're leaving then. Ranta, get up. Can you run?"

"Of course I can! Who do you think you're talking to, idiot!"

Who are you calling idiot? You should be thanking me for saving your ass! Haruhiro thought but did not say. Yume once said that it couldn't be helped that Ranta was Ranta and he would always be Ranta because he was Ranta. Haruhiro concentrated on how much he agreed with her at the moment, and *let it go*.

A long, high-pitched howl filled their ears.

That particular howl was the kobold's alarm call and it was exactly what Haruhiro had thought would happen. Good thing they had already begun to make a run for it, even though that didn't change the fact that they were being chased. Again. Sure it was still a scary situation, but overreacting posed a far greater danger.

"We're gonna head back to the third stratum!" Haruhiro decided. "Sorry Mary, but can you take the lead? I don't know the way as well as you! Get us to the closest sink well!"

"Yes!" came Mary's voice.

"Ranta, stay with Mogzo and watch our backside!"

"Fine!" Ranta shouted. "But it still pisses me off to take orders from you!"

"Quit talkin' back all the time!" Yume admonished, saying what Haruhiro was thinking. Thanks to that, Haruhiro didn't get as annoyed as he usually did.

With Mary leading, their path was clear and certain. Haruhiro realized this unconsciously. Maybe she had always borne the desire to return here and, because of that, she had reconstructed the layout and paths within the mines over and over in her mind. She said once that she wanted to move on, to be free of this place.

Was there something left, some unfinished business for her to do here? Something that she had always hoped to do but never mentioned? To Haruhiro, it had to be revenge. In other words...

They reached the sink well. The girls went up first, followed by Ranta, Mogzo, and finally Haruhiro bringing up the rear.

"Why aren't we staying to fight?" Ranta protested, despite everything that had transpired.

Haruhiro, as much as he trusted his teammates, didn't want to take any unnecessary risks. By the time they had all reached the third stratum, signs of pursuit from the kobolds had disappeared. Everyone was exhausted, so they searched for a relatively hidden area devoid of glow blossoms where they could rest.

Or that was the plan, at least.

It was dark. So completely and utterly dark that they couldn't see a thing; like suddenly being surrounded by a pool of darkness.

Haruhiro suddenly stopped. “Wait. Do you guys hear that? That sound...”

“Sound?” Shihoru repeated, craning her neck.

He strained his ears.

Clack, clack...

He could hear it.

Clack, clack, click...

Clack, clack...

A faint sound. But something was moving. Not a kobold. It didn’t sound like a kobold...

“Hold on,” Ranta said, then ran off somewhere.

He returned moments later with a bundle of glow blossoms in his arms and started to place them, two handfuls at a time, in a circle beyond the darkness surrounding them. The clusters of light from the glow blossoms revealed... footprints.

“G-g-g...” Mogzo shrank back. “G-ghosts...”

Yume let out a yelp and jumped back, crashing into Ranta and clinging to him. When she realized who it was, she let go just as quickly.

“Don’t try anything funny!” Yume said to him.

“You grabbed me first!” Ranta shot back.

“Do you think it could be...” Shihoru grasped her staff even tighter, her breathing heavy. “S-skeletons?”

“Yes,” Mary replied, stepping forward.

When Mary tapped the ground with the tip of her staff, a *shoom* sort of sound reverberated through the air.

“When the transformation first begins, the Curse of the Deathless King breathes false life into a corpse,” Mary explained. “Skeletons are what they become when their flesh begins to rot away and fall off.”

“It can’t be...” Haruhiro stopped, at a loss for words.

The skeletons—the people—illuminated by the faint light of the glow blossoms, were... they were...

There were three of them. Each of them was fully clothed and equipped with weapons and armor but their flesh, or more accurately their white and sickly-yellow bones, peeked out from underneath all their gear. One was covered in plate armor, sword held high. Another, dressed like Haruhiro, held his dagger out as if guarding. The last wore mage’s robes, accompanied by a staff.

“It’s been a while, everyone...” Mary said.

What kind of expression was she wearing? She was standing in front of him now, so Haruhiro couldn’t see her face. Her voice was rock steady, though, as if casually greeting an old friend after a long time apart. Mary had probably made up her mind long before this moment.

She had lost three friends down here in the Siren Mines. No one had said anything about having come back to retrieve their bodies. Even if she'd wanted to hold a proper funeral out of respect for her lost companions, the situation at the time had probably made it impossible. She had no choice but to leave their bodies behind.

But out here, on Grimgal's frontier, a body not cremated three to five days after death was all it took for the Curse of the Deathless King to take hold and begin their transformation into the undead. Mary knew all along of this cruel fate that awaited her former companions.

"Michiki. Ogg. Mutsumi." Mary whispered their names softly. "I'm so sorry..."

"Get ready!" Haruhiro shouted as he saw the skeleton mage, Mutsumi, raise her staff.

A pile of bones shouldn't be able to talk. Mere bones didn't have voices, but somehow they all heard her voice. "Derem... hel... en..."

It sounded more like a rush of wind than words. It was one of the most eerie things he'd ever heard.

"Everyone, dodge!" Mary yelled as she leapt to the side.

Haruhiro and the others followed suit after a split second, jumping left and right.

The skeleton mage continued her chant, "Van... alev..."

Wind. They were being blasted back by a flurry of wind, but not normal wind. It had the heat of fire.

"Whoa!" Haruhiro raised his arm to protect his face.

The wind felt almost hot enough to burn. Scorching. The heat defied belief. If he opened his eyes, he was pretty sure his eyeballs would melt. Probably. Maybe not.

"I'm going to [PURIFY] them from this blasted curse!" Mary shouted. Unlike usual, Mary aggressively moved to the front of party. "I need to get closer!"

There's no stopping her, Haruhiro thought. It was no use telling her to fall back just because it was dangerous. Now, it was just about letting her do it in her own way. All they could do was support her.

"Mogzo, take the warrior! Ranta, the thief is yours!" Haruhiro ordered.

Mogzo engaged the skeleton warrior Michiki with a shout, sword swinging.

"I got this!" Ranta yelled, leaping at the skeleton thief Ogg.

"Yume!" Haruhiro cast his eyes in Yume's direction.

Mary probably intended to use [PURIFY] on Mutsumi first. He and Yume needed to help, or she wouldn't be able to get the spell off.

"Right!" Yume nodded.

It might have been futile, considering that their opponent was a skeleton, but Haruhiro yelled at the top of his lungs and attacked Mutsumi head on. Yume did the same. Mutsumi moved as if she was going to cast another spell, but dodged instead. That spell earlier was probably [SIROCCO], a fire element spell. Fire magic was offense-based and focused on destruction, so getting hit by one of Mutsumi's spells meant trouble.

"Derem... hel... en..." Mutsumi chanted as she carved an elemental sigil into the air with the tip of her staff.

There it was again. *Derem hel en*, it sounded like the same spell she cast earlier.

“Run!” Haruhiro shouted.

He dodged left while Yume went right, running for all they were worth.

“...Rig... alev...”

What? Fire. Flames. Actual, real flames. A blazing curtain right in front of Mutsumi.

“That’s [WALL OF FIRE]!” Shihoru shouted with surprise. She brought up her own staff and chanted, “Oom rel eckt nem das!”

It was Shihoru’s [SHADOW BIND] spell. The shadow elemental fixed itself to the ground exactly where Ogg was about to step. The skeleton thief stepped in it and found himself unable to move.

“Nicely done, Shihoruuuuu!” said Ranta, extending the last syllable as he charged headlong at the stuck Ogg. Ranta unleashed a flurry of attacks.

Ogg, however, was the same class as Haruhiro. He simply used [SWAT] to deflect, deflect, deflect Ranta’s longsword. If the attack had been something heavy like Mogzo’s [RAGE CLEAVE] the technique wouldn’t work, but since it was Ranta, even Haruhiro would probably be able to deflect his attacks. It didn’t look like Ranta would be able to bring Ogg down by himself.

A short distance away, Mogzo grunted as he locked blades with Michiki. They pressed against one another with terrible strength. Mogzo intended to twist his sword around Michiki’s and follow up with [SPIRAL SLASH], but Michiki was also a warrior and knew the same techniques. It wasn’t going to be easy to pull them off on him. It meant that in the present state of things, Mogzo had a tough fight on his hands.

“W-what do we do now?” Yume asked, stopped in front of the wall of fire.

Mutsumi was on the other side, but they couldn’t see her behind the flames.

“I’m not su—whoa!” Haruhiro bent back, trying to avoid a ray of light launched from behind the wall.

It hit him right in the face. For a second there, he actually thought himself dead. But he wasn’t. It felt like he’d taken a roundhouse to the jaw, and though hurt like hell, he wasn’t critically injured. Was that... [MAGIC MISSILE]?

“Ahh!” Yume cried. She’d been hit by the spell too.

[MAGIC MISSILE]’s rays of light were flying everywhere. Haruhiro backed away from the wall of fire, unable to do anything more than avoid getting hit by the spell. He didn’t even know that spells could be combined like this.

Suddenly, Mogzo shouted. *Is Mogzo down?* was the first thing that came to Haruhiro’s mind. No, it appeared as if Mogzo was able to barely avoid getting hit. Michiki. And that technique. Haruhiro only caught a brief glimpse of it, but it looked like Michiki had performed a front-flip while bringing his sword down at the same time. It must have been a warrior skill, but Haruhiro didn’t realize warriors could possess such acrobatic techniques.

Mogzo immediately moved to counterattack but Michiki leapt back swiftly, and the two were deadlocked once again. Michiki. So strong. He was more agile and his techniques were better than Mogzo’s, though in terms of strength they were pretty much even.

If the fight remained one-on-one, Mogzo would eventually be at a disadvantage. Already he was beginning to get pushed back. If Mogzo went down, no one else would be able to take Michiki on. Sure, they had the advantage in numbers, but that meant nothing if their opponents managed to take them out one by one. They needed to back Mogzo up.

The moment Haruhiro came to that conclusion, Shihoru fired another spell.

“Oom rel eckt vel das!” she chanted.

[SHADOW ECHO]. The black seaweed-like elemental hit Michiki in the shoulder. But it wasn’t enough. The spell might have made Michiki tremble all over, but it sure didn’t look like it did anything significant. Maybe the [SHADOW ECHO] was less effective on skeletons.

“Shihoru, use [SHADOW BIND]!” Haruhiro said.

At the same time Ranta shouted, “The spell’s wearing off!”

Haruhiro looked and saw that Ranta was right. Ogg was moving about freely again, moving in and around Ranta, seemingly toying with him. The duration of [SHADOW BIND] was about twenty-five seconds. Had it been that long already? No, Haruhiro had a feeling that it had been less than that. He wasn’t really an expert on magic, but as far as he knew, magic worked better on some types of opponents than others. Depending on the caster’s strength of will, among other factors, a spell could sometimes be less effective.

“N-now! Oom rel eckt nem das!” Shihoru cast [SHADOW BIND] once more, again at the spot where Ogg was about to step next.

This time though, he saw right through her. He stepped over the spot on the ground where the shadow elemental had fixed itself and pressed the attack on Ranta.

While all that was happening, [MAGIC MISSILE] rays never stopped shooting out from the wall of fire. Haruhiro was forced to continue dodging them. *What are we gonna do?*

“Mutsumi!” Mary shouted her friend’s name.

“Wait, Mary!” Haruhiro cried in disbelief. “What are you—”

What was she doing? What the hell was she thinking? Mary had leapt straight into wall of fire. No way! She was going to get burned to a crisp. She was going to die, doing something crazy like that. Haruhiro wanted to stop her, but there was no way he would reach her in time. She disappeared behind the flames.

“O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous... [PURIFY]!”

Haruhiro heard Mary’s voice and moments later the flames began to die out, then disappeared altogether. Mary crouched low. At her feet a mage’s staff rolled on the ground near a mage’s robes, hat, and... a pile of ash.

Haruhiro’s voice caught in his throat. He had no words for this.

“It’s alright,” Mary said, getting to her feet.

Alright? Haruhiro thought to himself. *What’s alright here? Nothing. Nothing is okay right now at all.* Her hair had been singed, her face and other places burned raw red. But it wasn’t just that. Mutsumi was her teammate, maybe they had even been friends, and with her own hands, Mary had... she had... How was that alright? How could anyone ever say it was?

But any sort of consolation would have to come later.

“Yume, Shihoru, get to Mogzo!” Haruhiro said.

“Got it!” Yume replied.

“O-okay!” said Shihoru.

Leaving the two of them to backup Mogzo, Haruhiro concentrated on taking up a position behind Ogg. But Ogg was a thief too; he moved nimbly, keeping Ranta in check while careful not to let Haruhiro get behind him. *He's more skilled than me*, Haruhiro realized. Despite being a skeleton, Ogg's motor skills were far superior. Skeletons must have retained the same abilities they had before becoming undead.

Haruhiro would lose, maybe even quite easily, if they went head to head. *I hate to do this to you, Ogg, since you're Mary's old friend and all. Yeah, I'm weaker than you, but sorry buddy, I'm not fighting alone!*

“Ranta!” Haruhiro cried.

“Let's go!” said Ranta sharply.

Ranta and Haruhiro switched places. The two of them were surprisingly in tune with each other at times like this. Ranta's instincts were good.

Ogg appeared confused for a moment as he tried to find Ranta again. Finding his opening, Haruhiro attacked. Ogg deflected with [SWAT], then counterattacked, and this time it was Haruhiro's turn to [SWAT]. When Ogg attacked, Haruhiro used [SWAT]. When Haruhiro attacked, Ogg used [SWAT].

Around the fourth time they exchanged [SWAT], Ogg did something that made Haruhiro's blood run cold. Bit by bit, Ogg had been modifying his [SWAT] skill so that on the fourth time they clashed, Ogg came dangerously close to making Haruhiro drop his weapon.

I was right, Haruhiro thought. *I can't win against him*. But he didn't have to. Haruhiro suddenly stepped forward and thrust his dagger out. [SWAT] was, at its best, a defensive technique meant to block an opponent's attacks. In order to execute it, you had to devote the entirety of your concentration to your opponent's movements for at least a moment. The technique became almost second nature once you got used to it, and executing it became somewhat habitual.

In other words, you ended up using it automatically, whether it was a good thing or not.

Ogg used it now, against Haruhiro's sudden attack.

“Take this!” Ranta came in from behind, his diagonal slashing attack impeccably timed. His long sword connected with Ogg's right leg.

To be honest, chills went down Haruhiro's spine. He and Ranta hadn't coordinated anything beforehand, but still... *Ranta, you knew exactly what I was thinking*. It made Haruhiro feel a little dirty, actually.

“Ogg!” Mary called.

With one leg shattered, skeleton Ogg was no longer able to stand. Mary approached him now.

“O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous... [PURIFY]!”

Haruhiro wasn't sure if it was good or bad that he witnessed what unfolded before him next.

Blinding light enveloped Ogg and moments later, his body—or rather, his bones—crumbled slowly into dust. The sight made Haruhiro's heart ache and almost brought tears to his eyes. Perhaps it was a relief for Ogg, to

be freed from the curse by his companion. But to Haruhiro, it wasn't anything to feel glad about, because for Mary, it must have been almost unbearably cruel.

Mary dropped down near the pile of ash that had once been Ogg and scooped up a handful. No matter how tightly she clenched her fist though, ash continued to spill from the gaps between her fingers. Without looking up, she nodded.

"Only Michiki now," she said.

"Oy!" Ranta pointed the tip of his sword at Mary. Haruhiro had no idea why he would do such a thing. Ranta continued, "You've got all of us with you now! Don't forget that!"

Oh. Haruhiro understood the point Ranta was trying make, but he had a feeling that there were gentler, more appropriate ways to put it. And why did he need to point his sword at her too?

Haruhiro didn't pursue it though, because Mary looked up at Ranta. "You're right," she said with a slight smile.

"Haruhiro!" Shihoru shouted.

"Let's finish this!" Haruhiro replied, turning to Michiki.

Mogzo retreated continuously from Michiki's attacks while Yuma and Shihoru tried to support him, but it was in vain. Even if Shihoru tried to cast [SHADOW BIND] it could backfire if Mogzo was caught in it instead.

"Now it's me-time!" Ranta attacked Michiki from the side.

Michiki blocked with ease, but it gave the exhausted Mogzo a chance to catch his breath. Haruhiro set his sights on Michiki's back. The skeleton warrior was nimble, but not agile as Ogg. Ranta was attacking with everything he had. Mogzo possessed a certain grace when fighting in tandem with the team; he was pretty skilled at coordinating with everyone else. They could do this.

Now! Haruhiro latched onto Michiki's back. Since Michiki was a skeleton, it was useless to stab him, so Haruhiro went for his neck instead. He grabbed Michiki's skull with one hand and his neck vertebrae with the other and twisted in opposite directions. Mogzo followed up by smashing Michiki's right arm with his bastard sword, forcing Michiki to drop his weapon.

"O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous," Mary invoked.

She rested the fingers of one hand, formed into a pentagon, on her forehead and pressed her middle finger between her eyebrows to complete a hexagon; the symbol of Lord Luminous. She then threw her palm out at Michiki.

"[PURIFY]!"

Despite how bright it was, it was a sorrowful light. Michiki started to crumble in Haruhiro's arms. It was uncanny, how nothing but ash remained of his body. But it had been the same for Manato. It was the same for everyone, once they died. That's what death ultimately meant.

The light faded and Haruhiro slumped to the ground. He couldn't say anything, he couldn't think, not a single thing came to mind. Mary crouched down in front of Michiki's remains. Mogzo and Ranta were still on their feet, as was Yume. Shihoru held her hat down with one hand, breathing hard.

"It's done," Ranta said simply.

“Yes,” Mary scooped up a handful of Michiki’s ashes and closed her eyes. “With this, it’s finished once and for all. I did what I had to do. And I was able to do it because of you all. Thank you.”



“He was strong, Michiki.” Mogzo sighed. ” I have to become stronger too.”

Shihoru nodded emphatically. “I want more attack spells. I’ll learn offensive magic... I have to.”

Ranta snorted and stuck his chin out, expression thoughtful. “Maybe I’ll make up a secret killing technique that’s perfect for me.”

There he went again, saying stupid things. This one was easy to let go.

“Yume wants a wolf companion,” Yume said. “A wolf pup costs one gold but it’ll take time to raise it ‘till it’s big...”

“What are you planning to do until then?” Haruhiro ventured tentatively.

“Mmmm...” Yume tilted her head to one side. “It’s gotta stay with me, or else we won’t bond. I guess I’ll just hafta carry it in my pocket.”

“Will it fit in there?” Mary asked.

Yume patted her shirt pocket. “Hmm, dunno... maybe it’s a bit small after all. Or maybe I’ll buy a puppy bag...”

Ranta, as usual, ruined the mood by interjecting, “That’s a pretty big bag to carry around.”

“Yume’s gonna carry it herself so why does Ranta care?” Yume said. “And Yume’ll never, ever, ever, EVER let Ranta touch it.”

“Why not?” Ranta asked. “Me petting it isn’t gonna hurt it. In fact, it’ll make it stronger for sure!”

“No it won’t!” Yume said.

“Yes it will!”

“No. It. Won’t.”

“It will!”

“No way in tarnation it will!”

“Hell yeah it will, dumbass!”

“You know,” Haruhiro cut in with a wry grin. “They say, ‘Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched.’” He let out a sigh and left it at, “but whatever.”

Become stronger, huh? Stronger. What did that mean for him? Sure, he had a few skills in mind that he would like to acquire, but he didn’t think that they would suddenly make him dramatically stronger. Working on refining [BACKSTAB] and [WIDOW MAKER] had its limits too. In any case, raising his combat abilities was important for his own sake, but if he became a better leader, that would result in raising the level of the party as a whole.

He had a feeling that such advancements weren’t exactly visible to the eye. But that was fine; Haruhiro was best suited for backstage roles after all.

“Mary...” Haruhiro began.

“Yes?” Mary replied.

“Is it really okay? I mean, not getting a memento or something. To take back with you.”

“Ah—” she said, blinking rapidly as if caught off-guard by the question. “I hadn’t thought of it. You’re right. I think I’ll do just that. When we return to Altana, I have to let Hayashi know too...”

“Yeah,” Haruhiro nodded. “Right. I’m sure he’ll be relieved to hear the news.”

“I hope so...”

Mary started looking through Michiki’s leftover equipment. Haruhiro was tempted to ask her to heal those that needed it, but stopped himself. It was probably best not to disturb her while she was with the last remains of her precious friends, Michiki, Ogg, and Mutsumi.

“It’s been a hard day,” Shihoru whispered.

“Agreed,” Yume said, rotating her shoulders slowly.

“We’re not out of this yet,” Haruhiro reminded them, careful not to make it sound like a reproach. “It’s better not to let our guards down until we’re back in Altana... not that I think we’ll run into any more trouble.”

“We might,” Ranta snickered unpleasantly. “Who knows...”

Haruhiro wished Ranta would quit it. It’s because he said stuff like this that trouble always found them. A chill suddenly ran down Haruhiro’s spine. He turned to look behind him.

“De—” Haruhiro began.

“Huh?” Ranta turned too. “Whoa...”

“Not good...” Mogzo said.

“Eh?” Yume looked dumbstruck.

Shihoru let out a tiny gasp.

“It can’t be...” Mary whispered.

Why now? Of all the times, why now? Not that there would ever have been a good time for this.

“R-run—!” Haruhiro couldn’t think of anything else to say.

He was coming. He was here. *What? Come on, don’t do this. What the hell...* Black and white spotted fur, so large that it was hard to believe he was a kobold, holding a huge, thick-bladed sword that resembled a meat cleaver... Deathpatch. The monster kobold breathed in heavy huffs as he ran, saliva running down his chin in streams, and his blood red eyes shone as he closed in.

Deathpatch had three elder kobold minions with him, each equipped with plate armor and full helms, swords and round shields. No way could they win a fight against those. But could they turn tail and run? No. If they turned their backs, they would just get cut down, one by one.

Haruhiro didn’t want to do this, but he didn’t see any other alternative. And if standing to fight was the only option, then he couldn’t let himself get mentally defeated before the battle began. They had to win, and to win, they had to...

“Mogzo, sorry, keep Deathpatch busy! Everyone else, the elders!” Haruhiro said.

In his panicked state, Haruhiro didn't hear their replies. He couldn't help it. That didn't change that they had to bring down the minions as fast as they could though. After the elder kobolds were down, the real fight would begin.

"Oom rel eckt nem das!" Shihoru cast [SHADOW BIND], stopping one elder in its tracks.

Thanks to that, Haruhiro was able to calm himself down a little.

"Ranta, take one on by yourself! Yume and I will take the other!" Haruhiro said.

Both shouted their agreement.

"I'll help too!" Mary held her staff at the ready, following close behind Haruhiro and Yume.

Haruhiro was about to stop her, but decided against it. Until the minions were down, maybe it was better to have Mary actively fighting too. After they took care of the elders, she could retreat to the back again. Yes, that was good.

"THANK YOU!!!" Mogzo unleashed [RAGE CLEAVE] with all his strength.

Deathpatch, handling his meat cleaver sword as if it was made of tinfoil, deflected Mogzo's attack with ease and counterattacked immediately. The force behind the blow was monstrous. Deathpatch then continued to rain blows, and Mogzo barely managed to block. If even one of those hits got through his guard, it would be fatal for Mogzo, armored or not.

It scared the shit out of Haruhiro, but Mogzo must have been even more terrified. He couldn't think about Mogzo right now, though; he had to find a way to block out Mogzo's fear. But was there something else he had to do? No, that wasn't even a question. He had another job right now...

The two elder minions ignored Deathpatch and Mogzo, their attention focused entirely on Haruhiro and the remaining party members.

"[HATRED'S CUT]!" Ranta leapt at Minion C, and it shrank back.

"I'll go!" Haruhiro said, rushing past Yume and charging directly towards Minion B.

However, he had no intention of actually attacking it. Minion B swung its sword at him repeatedly, and Haruhiro used [SWAT] to deflect, deflect, and deflect again. In the meantime, while Minion B had its attention on Haruhiro, Yume and Mary flanked it on both sides and attacked simultaneously.

"[CROSS CUT]!"

"[SMASH]!"

Minion B blocked one with its sword and the other with its shield, but it was knocked off balance nonetheless. *Now!* Haruhiro thought. He deftly maneuvered himself behind Minion B and used [WIDOW MAKER]. Clinging onto its back, he lifted up the visor of its helm, plunged his dagger into the elder's right eye, twisted it in, and then pulled it back out before leaping away.

It wasn't dead yet, so Mary bashed it again with her staff while Yume kicked it to the ground. It didn't get back up. Two more to go. Their options were finishing Minion A, who was still bound in place by Shihoru's [SHADOW BIND], or helping Ranta with Minion C. Haruhiro didn't hesitate to go for Minion A, and Yume and Mary followed his lead. It couldn't move, so the fight should be easy.

Yume and Mary were right behind him as he circled around to Minion A's back and executed [WIDOW MAKER]. The three of them killed it the same way they killed Minion B, then it was on to Minion C.

How was Mogzo doing? He was probably having the hardest time of all. Every blow from Deathpatch's meat cleaver blade was bringing Mogzo down to one knee. He was somehow finding a way to get back on his feet between attacks, but Haruhiro knew that he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer by himself.

"I'll finish this one on my own!" Ranta shouted.

Haruhiro wavered for a moment, before replying, "Thanks!" He trusted his companions. He believed in Ranta. "Mary, fall back!" He ordered, while he and Yume moved to engage Deathpatch from the back and side.

The question was, even with the two of them helping, would they be able to keep Deathpatch contained? Why was he feeling so intimidated? Deathpatch had his back to Haruhiro now and wasn't even thinking of tossing a glance back. Despite that, Haruhiro had not the faintest idea how he should make his attack. It seemed to him that nothing he could throw at the monster would be effective.

It didn't matter. Effective or not, he had to try. There was nothing for it now. They were committed to this

He'd try [BACKSTAB] first... or he'd intended to at least. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground, tumbling head over heels. Huh? Had he gotten kicked by Deathpatch just as he was closing in to attack? He vaguely recalled something like that, but he wasn't really sure.

Was he injured? He tried getting up. His body was sore all over and his head was still spinning a little, but otherwise he felt okay. Probably. He couldn't really tell.

"Take this and this and this and this!" Ranta attacked with a lightning fast succession of blows, stripping both the sword and shield from Minion C's hands. With a shout, he rammed it with his shoulder, bringing it to the ground.

It was nothing but a display of brute force, but it worked. Ranta used his sword to knock the helm off Minion C's head and thrust it deep into the kobold's throat.

"Haha! Another Vice for me!" he declared.

Haruhiro couldn't believe that Ranta could think about collecting Vices at a time like this. But though there was much to be said about his lack of character, Haruhiro had to admit that Ranta was pretty dependable.

"Only Deathpatch left now!" Haruhiro shouted as loudly as he could, attempting to boost morale.

But a part of him knew it was futile. Haruhiro heard Deathpatch's guttural shout, *Wro-ga-huah! Wro-ga-huah! Wro-ga-huah!* and in that moment, Mogzo was completely overwhelmed.

Of course Haruhiro, Yume, and Ranta all wanted to come to Mogzo's aid, but there was something holding them back. An air of intimidation... or something. Was it really for such an uncertain, unclear reason?

No. It was the way Deathpatch moved; dynamic and swift. He lunged and bounded as if he had springs installed in his legs, all while deftly handling that meat cleaver sword of his. And he never stopped moving, so it was hard to find an opening to attack.

There had to be some pattern or habit that they could exploit. Haruhiro and the others just had to find it. But nobody had time to carefully analyze and pick apart his movements.

"Oom rel eckt vel das!" Shihoru's [SHADOW ECHO] came with beautiful timing, but it wasn't enough.

Deathpatch swung his blade with a roar and neatly sliced the seaweed-like shadow elemental in half, making it disappear. It was then. It was almost too small to be called an opening, but it was then that Mogzo struck. For the first time since the fight began, he went on the offensive.

He was completely out of breath and injured all over, but Mogzo must have known that he would be cut down for sure if he took any more abuse. He had no choice but to take a chance and go all in. Mogzo had made a calculated decision and Haruhiro thought it was okay. No other conclusion was possible. But just as this conclusion crossed his mind...

Gro-huah! Deathpatch shouted and blocked Mogzo's bastard sword not with his blade, but with his left arm.

What the—! Is that even possible?! Haruhiro thought. He was completely and utterly shocked; Mogzo probably even more so. Surprised or not, it wouldn't have changed what happened next.

Deathpatch brought his sword down viciously on Mogzo's left shoulder. The blade tore through the plate armor, the chainmail beneath, and down and down and down.

"MOGZOOOO!" Ranta threw himself at Deathpatch.

Shit! Ranta wasn't ready to take on an opponent like Deathpatch. The huge kobold swung his sword at Ranta with enough force to both crush him flat and cut him in half. Somehow, Ranta ducked in time to avoid the blow. Good move. And thanks to Ranta's intervention, Mogzo was able to roll away and get some distance between himself and Deathpatch.

However, his wound looked awful and was bleeding heavily.

"Mary, heal Mogzo!" Haruhiro needn't have said; Mary was already on it.

She cast a healing spell on him straightaway, but it would take time to work. They had to buy more time for her. Yume had drawn her bow at some point and now loosed an arrow at Deathpatch. At such close range, it was impossible to miss. The arrow buried itself in the kobold boss' side. Deathpatch roared and turned his attention to Yume.

"You don't have time to look away!" Ranta shouted, attacking again.

Deathpatch blocked Ranta's longsword with ease and then came for Yume violently. Yume, of course, ran for it.

"Wah! Scary scary scary...!" Yume yelped, flinging her bow away and using her pit rat rolling skill to get away.

Haruhiro chased after Deathpatch, but couldn't catch up. It wasn't just now, either; Haruhiro hadn't been able to get into position since the start.

"Shit!" Haruhiro grunted.

"O Darkness, O Lord of Corruption..." Ranta chanted a spell. "[DARK INVITATION]!"

A purple-black, headless torso appeared from out of nowhere. It had two eyes like pits and a rip for a mouth. A demon. Zodiak.

"Get him! Zodiak!" Ranta commanded.

{I don't wanna! Don't wanna! Don't wanna! Don't wanna! Keehehehehe... Heehehehe!}

"I knew it..." Ranta sighed.

Haruhiro couldn't even begin to express how disgusted he was. Of all the idiotic, lazy... he didn't even have words. Yume cried out as Deathpatch kicked her. It was hard, and it sent her flying.

“Stupid demon! Come here!” Ranta caught Zodiak by the arm and pulled him close.

Haruhiro didn’t even know that demons could be grabbed like that. Ranta then spun towards Deathpatch and hurled Zodiak at Deathpatch with all his strength.

{Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you! FUUUUUUUUUUCK YOUUUUUUUUU!}, shrieked the demon.

The demon hit Deathpatch smack in the face. Except it wasn’t really “hit” so much as “got stuck on.” Deathpatch immediately peeled the demon off and flung him away, but that moment of inattention gave Ranta the chance to close in again with [ANGER THRUST].

The attack was aimed straight at the kobold boss’ throat, but Deathpatch twisted away just enough for Ranta’s longsword to only shave a few inches off the fur at the side of his neck and nick the skin a bit. While blood didn’t spray all over the place, Deathpatch was bleeding a little.

Yes! Haruhiro thought. They had finally scored a hit. Deathpatch wasn’t invincible and this wasn’t a losing fight after all. They could do this. He was an opponent they could fight if they did things their way. Haruhiro had a feeling that maybe they could even win. That feeling evaporated the next moment.

Deathpatch let out a horrible shriek. The color of his eyes had changed; up until just a moment ago the light that shone in his eyes was somehow a different shade. Suddenly, in less than a fraction of a second, Ranta was down and unmoving on the ground.

What just happened? Haruhiro hadn’t seen it. All he saw was Ranta’s form prone on the ground, his body in a pool of blood, and Deathpatch lifting his sword high over its head to deliver the finishing blow. Something clung onto its sword arm however... a purple-black shape. Haruhiro couldn’t believe his eyes.

“Zodiak?!” Haruhiro muttered.

{Keehehehe... Eehehehe... Heehehehehehe!} snickered the demon.

Deathpatch half-grunted, half-sneered as if to say “you’re in my way,” grabbed the demon like an eagle would its prey, and slammed it to the ground. With a hissing sound, the demon evaporated like rising steam and disappeared. Thanks to Zodiak’s interference though, Ranta’s life had been saved.

When Deathpatch lifted his sword once more and turned his attention back to finishing Ranta, Mogzo jumped in and blocked the kobold’s meat cleaver sword, just as Deathpatch was bringing it down. What would have happened had Zodiak not obstructed Deathpatch when he did? Mogzo most likely wouldn’t have made it in time. Zodiak had just saved Ranta’s life.

Shihoru was helping Yume up, but she had one hand pressed against her midsection and was clearly in pain. Mogzo, even as he was being slowly beaten back by Deathpatch, made sure that he was drawing the kobold away from Ranta.

“Deathpatch gets stronger the more he’s hurt!” Mary said, as she ran towards Ranta. “Haru! I’m almost at my limit! I can only cast two more spells, maybe three if I push it, but that’s all!”

Haruhiro held his breath, jaw clenched tight. Mogzo. Even if Mary had healed his wounds, she couldn’t restore stamina, and he was already showing signs of fatigue. Deathpatch. The more he was hurt, the stronger he got? That meant the more hits they scored on him, the tougher the fight would get. What the hell was that? How were they supposed to fight something like that? They couldn’t.

They had to run. That was their only option now. But could they really escape? Were that an option, they would have run from the start. No, Deathpatch had three elder minions with him then. The circumstances were different. Now, it was just him. The question was, would all of them make it to safety if they ran now?

Deathpatch was fast. If the kobold decided to give chase, they wouldn't be able to outrun him. If they were attacked from the back as they ran, they'd be finished. They would be cut down in a fraction of a second. One fraction, one person. Two fractions, two people. Three... and yeah. Not an option. Haruhiro had hoped everyone could retreat together, but the reality wouldn't allow that.

If they all ran, then a number of them would get killed for sure. If they were lucky, maybe a few of them would make it out. If they were unlucky, all of them would die.

One. At the very least, one of them had to stay behind. One of them had to keep Deathpatch occupied. It would be a fight to the death. Whoever stayed behind would die. One would die, the other five would live.

That was their only option now. Haruhiro understood that. There was nothing for it. Even as he debated with himself, Deathpatch might kill Mogzo at any moment. If Mogzo went down, then it was over for all of them. If Mogzo died, everyone would follow. That was the worst possible outcome. It had to be avoided at all costs.

Let Deathpatch kill one person so the remaining five could live. Who then? Who would remain behind? And did Haruhiro have to be the one to ask? Did he have to say to one of the others, "everyone's going to run now, so keep 'im busy while we do that"? Did he have to ask one of the others to die for them? Maybe someone like... like... Mogzo.

Ranta, with his healing spell resolved, sat up with a grunt.

Haruhiro closed his eyes. "Everyone, I'm sorry..."

I'm sorry for being such a pathetic leader... But doing the impossible was just that, impossible. Haruhiro jumped onto Deathpatch's back just as the kobold was about to beat Mogzo to the ground. The maneuver didn't knock the wind out of the kobold boss, but Haruhiro was able to latch on with unexpected ease. His decision was made, he didn't have anything more to fear. Or that's the way it felt, anyway. Whatever will be—will be...

Deathpatch spun, trying to throw Haruhiro off. *I won't let you!* No way he was going to let himself get shaken off. Haruhiro clung on with desperate strength, hitting Deathpatch again and again and again on the top of the head with the pommel of his dagger.

As he continued to pummel the kobold, he shouted, "Mogzo, Ranta, Mary, Yume, Shihoru...! Now, while he's distracted...! RUN!"

"B-b-but!" Haruhiro thought it was Mogzo talking, but he couldn't be sure.

"It'll be okay!" Haruhiro said, but all of his concentration was on emptily pounding away with his dagger.

Hit, hit, hit. Continuously hit. Deathpatch was a kobold, and as such, his body was built differently from a human's. A kobold could reach backwards with more range than a human, and Deathpatch took advantage of that to hit Haruhiro. Even though he couldn't reach that far back with his sword, Deathpatch still landed blows all over Haruhiro's back and head with his elbow.

Shit. Haruhiro wanted to whimper in pain, but felt that all his strength would leave his body before he had a chance. But his strength did not leave.

"Don't make me throw away my life for nothing!" Haruhiro yelled instead. "I'm this beaten up already! There's no saving me now! I'm finished so just GO! Please, run! PLEASE!"

"Let's go!" Ranta shouted.

Ah, Ranta. Good. That was good. That was what made Ranta who he was. They needed someone like him, or the team would have been in real trouble. He could persuade the others to go. Only Ranta could do it. *I'm counting on you, Ranta...* In the corner of his eye, Haruhiro saw Yume turning her head to look back at him, but her body was facing the other way. She was going too, which reassured him a little.

If Yume went, then Shihoru would too. Yume. He recalled how good it felt when Yume petted his head. Shihoru... he hoped that she wouldn't keep dwelling on Manato.

"Haru!" Mary called.

Go. Just run for it... He was just starting to like Mary a little, so he wanted her to survive and live on. *So go on, get out of here...* He could hear Mogzo's shout and it rang distant. *Yes, alright,* Haruhiro thought. *Run, Mogzo. You're strong and you can get even stronger. Become stronger...* Mogzo was the team's core. *We're nothing without him.*

Except that it wasn't "us" anymore. Haruhiro wouldn't be part of the team anymore. It was just him left now. There was nothing for it. He had made the decision because there was no other way. He couldn't ask one of the others to die for them. He would die himself, rather than asking someone else.

It would be tough on everyone though; no one could feel good about being alive, because Haruhiro had sacrificed himself. He didn't want them to think of it that way, but they probably would. He hoped that they would at least be able to get over it eventually. If they didn't, then doing something stupid crazy like this wouldn't be worth it.

Michiki. Ogg. Mutsumi... If he died here, would Haruhiro become like them? If so, he hoped that Mary would return and [PURIFY] him. *Please, turn me into ash...* By that time, would the team have found a replacement for him? The thought made Haruhiro feel hopelessly lonely and depressed.

It was good then that he didn't have to think about it further, because he was at his limit. He felt as if he was could float up and out of his body any moment. Shit. He'd been thrown off. Deathpatch had finally thrown him off.

Haruhiro hit the ground and Deathpatch turned to run after the others. He wasn't going to kill Haruhiro? Deathpatch would let Haruhiro go and Haruhiro would escape death while the kobold chased after his companions? No. No, no, no, NO!

How much time had Haruhiro bought so far? How far away had everyone else been able to get? His internal clock told him that a good amount of time had passed, but maybe it only felt that way. Maybe no time had passed at all. He didn't know.

"Hey! Over here!" Haruhiro shouted.

Haruhiro got to his feet, but Deathpatch didn't look his way. *Can't let him get away, can't let him get away!* It was then, in that moment—honest to god—the **line** appeared. It wasn't the hazy, indistinct **line** that he usually saw, this one was sharp, defined and glowed bright. Haruhiro felt himself move.

So slow, he thought to himself. *Why am I moving so slowly?* But it wasn't just his own movements; Deathpatch moved also as if the air was molasses. Maybe that was a good thing. Easier for him to close the gap that way. He was close now. *There!*

Haruhiro leapt forward towards Deathpatch. There, a point on the kobold's back, a vital organ or something. Haruhiro's dagger slipped in smoothly with no resistance at all to hit that vital spot.



Haruhiro had not the slightest doubt. It was over. Deathpatch pitched forward and slumped to the ground. For a moment, Haruhiro's head was buried in the kobold's patchy, dirty fur as they fell forward together, but he quickly rolled off and to the side. He wanted to say something, but all that would come out from the base of his throat was a heavy grunt-like noise.

He felt his head and neck and realized that they were covered with blood. He hurt all over too. A thought suddenly occurred to him. *What if I'm left behind down here like this?* Shit, not good. But he didn't think he could move right now.

"H-hey! Guys! Everyone, come back!" He finally managed to call after the others, believing, without a doubt, that they would come back for him.

And they did.

Chapter 17: Lies and Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

“Heeeeeeey! Harucchi! I heard all about it! You killed Deathpatch! You’re AMAZING!!! I’m soooooo JEALOUS! I’m superrrrrrrr ENVIOUS!!”

They were having drinks at Sherry’s when Kikkawa approached their table, loud and boisterous as usual. It was all Ranta’s fault for opening his big mouth. The news spread fast, and now everyone knew that Haruhiro and his team were the ones who killed Deathpatch.

That was fine with Haruhiro though. He knew killing Deathpatch was one hundred percent luck, but dead was dead, and this felt much better than being mocked as “The Goblin Slayers” all the time.

“Yume’s so glad.” Yume fell flat onto the table with a sigh. “Yume sure thought we were done for a dozen times...”

“Y-yeah... me too,” Mogzo agreed, looking sleepy. “It was a really close call.”

Shihoru glanced reproachfully at Haruhiro. “And *someone* almost got himself killed...”

“Uh... that was... you see...” Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck and gave a short cough. “Yes. I regret my decision. I’m sorry.”

“Oh...” Shihoru’s gaze dropped to the floor, her expression bashful. “I-I was just kidding. I’m not saying it’s your fault or anything. Really...”

“Mmm...” Yume said looking thoughtful. “If Haru didn’t stay behind to keep Deathbatch distracted, we all might have been wiped up.”

“Yume, the expression is ‘wiped out’,” Haruhiro, ever the straight man, corrected.

“Ho... that so?” Yume asked.

“And it’s *Deathpatch*, not *Deathbatch*...”

“It all sounds the same to me,” Yume frowned.

“B-but!” Mogzo indicated the meat-cleaver sword he had his arm wrapped around. “Everything turned out fine in the end. All’s well that ends well, as they say...”

“You’re right, Mogzo,” Yume agreed. “And you got yerself a new sword!”

Shihoru nodded. “Your old bastard sword was getting really worn out too.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Mogzo said, beaming with delight. “What do you guys think I should name it? I’ve been trying to think of something, but nothing’s come to mind...”

Yume’s suggestion was “Meat-Cleaver Sword #1” which Shihoru timidly, but immediately, shot down. Surely Mogzo wanted to name it something awe-inspiring and cool. What was his definition of “cool” though? Something like, “Eternal Blaze of the Executioner” was what Haruhiro came up with, but he declined to propose it out loud. It sounded horrible even to his own ears. So... a name... name...

Ranta was with Kikkawa, retelling the “Legend of the Heroic Deathpatch Slaying Warriors” to the other Crimson Moon members gathered. The way Kikkawa was telling it, it was almost like he’d been there too, and Haruhiro wasn’t sure if that was amusing or annoying.

Mary had said earlier that she wanted to talk with Hayashi, so she was up on the second floor with him. Haruhiro hoped that after this, she would be able to find some peace within herself.

He took another swig of beer and frowned at the bitter taste. He was really glad that no one died back there. But despite how relieved he was that everyone got out alive, he couldn’t be entirely happy about it, deep down in his heart. Did he really perform flawlessly? Could there have been a better way, could he have made a better choice?

At the time, he’d believed, he had chosen the best option. If they were put in the same situation again, Haruhiro thought that he would make the same decision. But was that really the best thing to do? Maybe there was something he could have done before they were driven into a corner with no way out. Something like preventing the team from getting into that kind of situation in the first place?

The self-criticism that filled his mind overshadowed any happiness he was feeling from everyone surviving. But that wasn’t the case for anyone else. Why? Why was he the only one who couldn’t be happy?

Because he was the leader.

The others were different. That was why. There was a gap between him and the rest of his companions. Was this a gap that couldn’t be filled? Not now, not ever?

Suddenly Haruhiro felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Mary asked.

She was so close, it almost made him jump.

“Ah...” He stalled for a moment before finally asking, “You’re done talking with Hayashi?”

“Yes. Just now,” she replied. “Is something wrong?”

“U-uhh... why do you ask?” Haruhiro said.

“You seemed a little out of it,” Mary explained.

“Really? Er, n-no, I’m fine. It’s nothing, really,” Haruhiro assured.

Mary smiled slightly. “You’re a terrible liar, Haru.”

“I guess...” Haruhiro said, sliding his chair over to make room for her.

Yume, Shihoru, and Mogzo were still hotly debating names for the sword. Truthfully, Haruhiro would very much have liked to confide in Mary about his doubts. And just a few days ago, he probably would have. But not now. Not anymore. He was more self-aware now than before.

He was the leader. Even if he lacked ability and was ill-suited for the role, he was still the leader. If he didn’t keep a good enough grip on himself, all of his teammates might die.

“Really, I’m fine,” Haruhiro said, this time with a smile. “It’s a lie, but it’s also the truth.”

Mary patted him softly on the shoulder once more. She withdrew her touch almost immediately, but for Haruhiro it was reward enough. A poor, simple reward it may have been, but he didn’t criticize himself for

feeling that way. It was fine to enjoy the things that were meant to be enjoyed, because no one knew when these happy times would come to an end. It might be soon, for all anyone knew.

“Oy! Haruhiro!”

Ranta and Kikkawa, arms linked, skipped over to him. “The rest of you guys too! Get over here! Kemuri from the Daybreakers is here tonight and he just so happens to want to buy the slayers of Deathpatch a drink!”

“You’ll never get a SUPE-CHANCE like this again, Harucchi!” Kikkawa declared. “SUPE-DUPE CHANCE!”

“What’s a ‘supe-dupe’?” Haruhiro sighed, shrugging his shoulders. Then he blinked several times as the information sunk in. “Wait, you mean *Souma*’s Daybreakers?”

“Whoa...” Yume’s eyes went wide.

“That’s incredible...” Shihoru said, trying to make herself appear as small as possible.

Mogzo stood up and sat down several times, unable to decide which was appropriate. “W-w-what should we do...”

“It’s a rare opportunity,” Mary said, cool and collected as ever. “We should take him up on it.”

Haruhiro nodded right away, surprising even himself a little. Were he the same Haruhiro as he had been yesterday, he would have hesitated. Today, he was no longer that person. It made him wonder what changes tomorrow had in store for him.

Not dying today meant that he would get to see the person he became tomorrow. *And who knows, that might just be a wonderful thing indeed.*

“Let’s go, everyone.”



Afterword

From time to time, I'm asked what's my ideal game. I've played a lot of RPGs before, so I would naturally say that it would be an RPG. Personally, the games that stood out most to me would be *Dragon Quest III and V*, *Final Fantasy II, IV, and VII*, and *Romancing Saga*. As for MMORPGs, I would say games along the lines of *Ultima Online* or *Everquest*. But even though both MMOs and traditional RPG games are always under development, even as new titles are being released, some would say that they are only being improved, and not actually evolving. With MMOs, *World of Warcraft* is the reigning champion while games that came after only improved or polished the established formula. One gets the feeling that the formula has already been perfected, or has reached its apex.

When I first played *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* and the early MMOs, I felt as if my senses had been spirited away by the new worlds that had lain open before my eyes. My insignificant self was about to step from my tiny, trifling world into a vast and new one. I didn't want to leave that world, where everything I saw and heard were brand new. To be honest, I even shut myself out of the real world for a time.

I wonder, what kind of newly released game would it have to be to make me feel that way again? Would it have to depend on what the advances of technology brought? Or maybe something new born from a combination of established formulae? Or would it have to be a game that no one has ever imagined before, appearing out of nowhere like a comet in the sky?

No matter how much I think about it, I don't really know. Maybe that no game will expand my world like that ever again.

But luckily for me, there are novels. I know what a person like me can write, but because I'm neither a genius nor experienced, nothing I attempt goes smoothly and it's like groping my way along one step—or perhaps half a step—at a time. I'm always very intimidated when I attempt to write a novel. I always ask myself, can I really do this? Am I biting off more than I can chew?

Somehow though, I write on the momentum of sheer desperation. Only after it's done and I look back and I see the road that's been paved, and I realize for the first time, that's the road I just came down.

I've run out of paper. I would like to thank my editor, K-san, Shirai Eiri, the designers at KOMeworks, everyone else involved in the production and distributions of this book, and the readers who hold it now in your hands.

With much gratitude and love, I place my pen down for today, and hope to see you again.

– Jyumonji Ao

Bonus Chapter: High Elf

Her name was Leelya. Leelya Sturm. She was a high elf from the noble house Sturm of the Seven Swords. Furthermore, she was the heir of the house, the inheritor of the line, though she never thought of her lineage as noble. At best, she acknowledged that the House of Sturm had once been great, but she now considered it a shadow of its former glory. It was not only the House of Sturm that was antiquated, elven society as a whole had stagnated in the distant past. They had become weak, ineffectual, and fallen into a state of decline.

Leelya was a prodigal child, hailed as the avatar of Varyag the Sacred Blade. Much had been expected of her future since her childhood days, yet she could not fathom what future there could possibly be. So though she knew the road would be full twists and turns and peril, she decided leaving Kagemori was the correct path.

She would experience the outside world for herself and broaden her knowledge. It was for this purpose, and no other, that she left her homeland behind.

“Souma.”

When she called his name, the man paused in his manipulation of the eating utensil known as “chopsticks” and met her gaze. His countenance remained unchanged. His lack of expression made it difficult to presume his unvoiced thoughts, yet she knew it was not only that which made him difficult to read. She could also see that his mood was slightly dour.

Souma, for the most part a man of sophistication, had carved from a tree with his own hands the chopsticks he used now. Besides herself, Souma’s company consisted of the large, slightly dark-skinned Paladin, Kemuri; the Necromancer Pingo, who seemed a child upon first glance; Zenmai, the artificial construct given life by Pingo; and the former Thief turned Shaman, Shima, who did not remain in one place long and preferred to sleep under the stars.

Kemuri was the type who slept anywhere and for as long as he liked when the mood was upon him, while Pingo was his opposite, and hardly slept at all. Pingo’s constant companion Zenmai utterly lacked the need for sleep. Shima, though an elegant, well-kept woman, did not mind tossing and turning about a bed of grass as she slept.

Leelya, born and raised in the elven city of Arnott, hardly knew what to think of it in the beginning but was now entirely used to it. They were currently gathered under the starry sky, sitting around the campfire each in their own manner, eating or resting. Leelya delicately combed her silvery hair while Souma ate.

Whether dried meat or fruit, Souma would pick each up with his chopsticks and bring the piece to his mouth one at a time. It seemed to be a kind of preference for him, which was fine with her.

“You’re holding your chopsticks with your left hand.”

At her remark, Souma lowered his gaze and his eyes grew ever so slightly wider.

“You’re right. Maybe because the food is unappetizing,” he replied.

“Perhaps you’re correct,” Leelya agreed.

“I wonder why,” Souma said, tilting his head slightly to the side in puzzlement as he switched the chopsticks to his right hand.

He had not the slightest notion why he’d been using his left hand, as he was right-handed. And if he did not know, then how could Leelya have possibly known?

“Also,” Leelya added and indicated a spot just below her own lips. “You’ve something on your face.”

For an instant, Souma’s expression seemed to shout, *That’s not possible!* He brought his hand up to wipe the spot several times.

“No, I don’t...” he said.

“I know,” said Leelya, expression blank. “It was a joke.”

“Ha,” Shima laughed as she laid propped up on one elbow, covering a yawn.

Pingo, seated on Zenmai’s knees and gazing at the stars, chuckled covertly. Kemuri snored, fast asleep.

Souma lowered his gaze, the corners of his mouth curved down ever so slightly in what could have been a frown. Leelya’s expression softened. Souma hurriedly sat up straighter and schooled his expression into calm once more. One got the impression that he was a rather interesting man.

Three days ago Leelya and the others had entered the former Ishmael Kingdom, domain of the undead. It was a land of evil and atrocity, where the undead willingly gave themselves over to be unmade then remade to run rampant in stronger, yet more hideous forms. Even Souma’s company, famed as they were, could not afford carelessness here, though careless they had been just the day before.

Souma, as usual, was employing his Samurai Class’ katana skills on the enemies coming at them. The undead could not approach without being immediately cut down. His technique and agility were nothing less than breathtaking. However, Leelya, a proud master sword dancer who had also trained ceaselessly so as to not shame her reputation as a unparalleled prodigy, sensed something amiss.

Souma was not his normal self. His blade was less swift, his feet heavier, and his movements a touch slower. It seemed to Leelya almost as if he was fighting with a sprained ankle. Yet if he was injured, it would have been a simple matter to ask Kemuri to heal him.

Though Shima, who had changed her class from Thief to Shaman, hardly looked it, she was a highly industrious woman. Natural talent played a part, but she trained even while she slept and, in a short amount of time, had mastered the hidden techniques of the elves and was exonerated by the head of the Six Spells. She was not the first human to become a Shaman, but she was the only one to receive the acclimation of the haughty Six Spells. And she was capable of healing any wound instantly.

When the fight was over, Leelya approached Souma directly. “Your clumsiness and lack of grace was rather unseemly. If you are injured or feeling unwell, perhaps it would be wise to have Shima take a look.”

Souma thought it over for a moment before replying, “I thought something was off too...”

He pulled off his greaves then and there, and the problem became immediately apparent. His boots were on the wrong foot. Simply put, he had his left boot on his right foot and his right boot on his left foot.

“So that’s why,” Souma said.

Of course that was why. But what possessed him to make such a blunder? When Leelya asked, Souma tilted his head slightly to the side and murmured, “No idea,” and Leelya wondered if she should simply dismiss it as a rare lapse. Yet Souma frequently tended to blunder in such ways.

Souma was a rather strange man, thought Leelya. He was sophisticated and smart and it would not be hyperbole to say that his swordsmanship was at the summit of the craft. He was neither careless nor disorganized. Leelya would normally say that he was very reliable, not that she needed to, or ever would need to rely on others. Souma’s leadership could not be flawed; he had excellent judgment and a sense of responsibility as if he’d been born with it.

He was one that, if thrown into the wild naked and alone, could still find a way to survive. Yet something was also lacking. Leelya had been with his company a while now, but she did not know what it could be. From time to time, he would do something unexpected that would take her completely by surprise. He was like no elf ever was, hence her minor interest in him. Indeed, it was a minor interest—nothing more, nothing less.

Souma had soon laid down on the ground. Kemuri was still fast asleep and Shima prepared to follow. Pingo and Zenmai would stay on guard through the night though no one asked it of them. Leelya too felt herself falling asleep. No preparation was needed; her pack served as a pillow, her cloak a blanket. Yet she did not sleep right away.

Lying still with her eyes closed, much began to float into her thoughts. She both ignored and allowed them to take hold, waiting for her consciousness to grow distant. From time to time she would peek from under half-closed eyelids at Souma's form beyond the campfire. He was lying face up, arms tucked under his head for a pillow, one knee propped up. Had he fallen asleep?

She could not tell. If something happened, Pingo would give the alarm and there was no doubt he would immediately be on his feet. He was most likely a light sleeper. Souma turned over, mumbling "Nn..." with a low groan and was now facing her. Slightly startled, she immediately shut her eyes again.

Leelya was not watching him with a purpose and it would hardly do for him to mistakenly believe otherwise. But Souma was still after that, perhaps having fallen asleep. Leelya sighed softly and opened her eyes slightly again.

She was met with Souma's gaze. He was looking directly at her. Leelya felt herself stiffen. Should she explain herself? No, she had not done anything wrong. Souma was the one looking at her and they just happened to meet the other's gazes. She did not owe him any sort of explanation. There was no need for even the slightest semblance of one. Souma was the one at fault... or perhaps not *fault*, but... part of the responsibility was his, too.

And he should take responsibility for it. It would be troublesome for her if he failed to. But before that, eye contact. She needed to break eye contact with him. She could bear no more of that gaze. It was quite... embarrassing to be looking into each other's eyes in this way. Yet why was she unable to look away?

Before she could find an answer Souma closed his eyes and turned away so that he was lying face up again. Leelya realized only then. Souma had not been looking at her. He had not even been awake. He had not been staring at her half asleep, either; he merely had his eyes open while asleep and coincidentally turned to face her. It was nothing more than that.

Nothing more, yet, again he began to mumble something. "N... Nnn..."

Leelya thought it sounded as if he was calling someone's name. Perhaps it was just her imagination. Unable to take it anymore, she curled up into herself as she felt a sharp pain stab at her chest. What was this feeling in her heart? What was causing it? She did not know. She had not the slightest notion.

"I do not know," she whispered to herself.

Leelya had hoped to come to know the outside world; to gain knowledge, insight, and the emotional strength to remain unperturbed, impassionate. She had not told this to anyone as of yet, but Leelya was convinced that the elven race that was now walking the path of decline must be returned to its former state of glory.

She was here for that purpose alone. Indeed, she admitted that she had an interest in Souma. However, it was merely a minor interest.

And certainly nothing more.

Kobolds

A humanoid race, but with dog-like heads. They are smaller than humans at just under five feet tall, but some individuals can reach up to five feet and a half. They are not as intelligent as humans, but their society has a strict social hierarchy, like canines. Their familial bonds are strong, but they do not accept outsiders.

They prefer to live underground, but not as much as dwarves or gnomes. They have deft fingers and their metalworking skills cannot be taken lightly. All kobolds practice a shamanistic religion. Talismans are their currency and the higher their status in society the more valuable their talisman. The members of Crimson divide them into several classes:

[Kobold Types]

- **Lesser Kobold** Can be found on the first stratum and immediate area around the Siren Mines. They are weak and poorly equipped.
- **Kobold**
 - Low-Ranked Worker: Occupies the second stratum
 - Normal Worker: Occupies the third stratum and lower. They serve as underlings for elder kobolds.
- **Elder Kobold**
 - Foreman: Can be found from the third stratum down. They oversee and direct worker kobolds.

※ Other ranks and occupations exist

Orcs

From a human perspective, they are an ugly race with greenish skin, squished noses, pointed ears, big mouths, and tusks. They are slightly bigger than humans, though horizontally more than vertically, and they have a custom of dying their hair a wide variety of colors. Individuals who want to stand out tend to dye their hair more ridiculous colors and wear gaudy clothes. Even though they might seem brutish, their intelligence matches that of humans. Despite that, they love fighting and can't resist fighting even each other, often spilling each other's blood.

Their level of culture is on par with humans and they arm themselves with a variety of equipment. Due to differences in build, humans have difficulty using orc-forged equipment, but it's not impossible. Orc arms and armor can also be modified to be suitable for humans. They usually possess the same tools as humans, but most of their things are metal-made and geared towards fighting.

Orcish currency is button-like objects made from quartz crystal, worth between five to five hundred coppers each. Since the age of the federation, orcs were considered to be as dangerous as the undead. From the time of the Deathless King to the current day, they are the most active race occupying the frontier lands. Orcs are considered powerful enemies and, by nature, the enemy of humans. They are the only race that has attacked Altana directly. Some orcs can speak the human language.

[Damroww Old Town]

Damroww is about two and a half miles from Altana. It is the second largest city of what was once the Arakavia Kingdom. Damroww is large and sprawling but has become entirely occupied by the undead after the Undying Kingdom invaded. When the Undying Kingdom fell apart, the slave goblins rebelled and fought the undead for control of Damroww. It was a long war, and during that time, humans began to establish Altana as a frontier city. Goblins eventually took over Damroww, but they never went as far as invading Altana as well.

Goblins are wary of human fighting ability and are afraid to attack head on. Damroww's Old Town, which lies in the southeast sector of the city, has mostly fallen into anarchy and is occupied by low-ranked goblins. These goblin exiles are mostly used by new Crimson Moon members to gain experience fighting, but strong goblins also roam this sector, forcing Crimson Moon trainees to exercise caution. There is one especially dangerous goblin that tows around a pet hobgoblin...

[Capomorti Fortress]

Located a little less than four miles from Altana and occupied by orcs. A fortress that is strictly guarded and overseen from a central watchtower, apparently to keep an eye on Altana's movements. Altana has been attacked several times in the past by offensives that used Capomorti Fortress as a base, but the orcs have never been successful in breaching Altana's defenses. Also, Altana's army has managed to take over the fortress several times, but the orcs have always managed to reclaim it. The surrounding area is a good hunting ground for Crimson Moon members who already possess a little bit of fighting experience.

[Siren Mines]

Located five miles from Altana, the Siren Mines used to be managed by the Arakavia Kingdom. Today, it has been overrun and occupied by kobolds who have built their society down in its depths. The mines are divided into stratum numbering ten total. The kobolds occupying the upper stratum tend to be weak, but kobolds on the lower levels are highly dangerous. The kobolds on the first and second stratum are the lowest in their society, but from the third stratum down, caution is necessary. Mary's party, consisting of herself, Hayashi, Michiki, Mutsumi, and Ogg, once fought with the most dangerous of all kobolds down on the fifth stratum. Only two of them managed to make it out alive.